

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 2000

## RUNAWAYS TRACED

The twins were 15—gone to be  
snow bunnies in Colorado?

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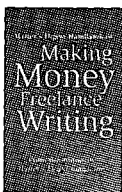
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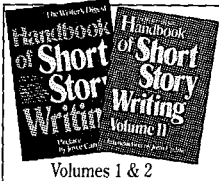
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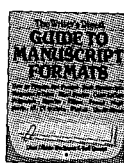


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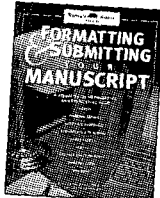
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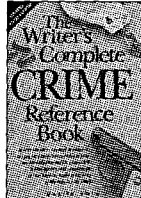
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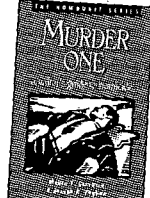
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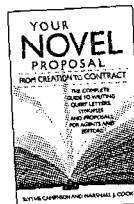
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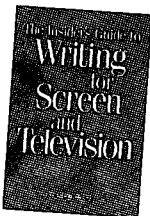
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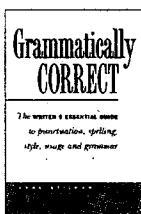
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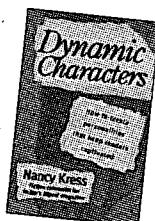
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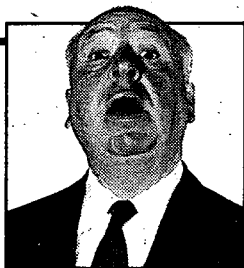
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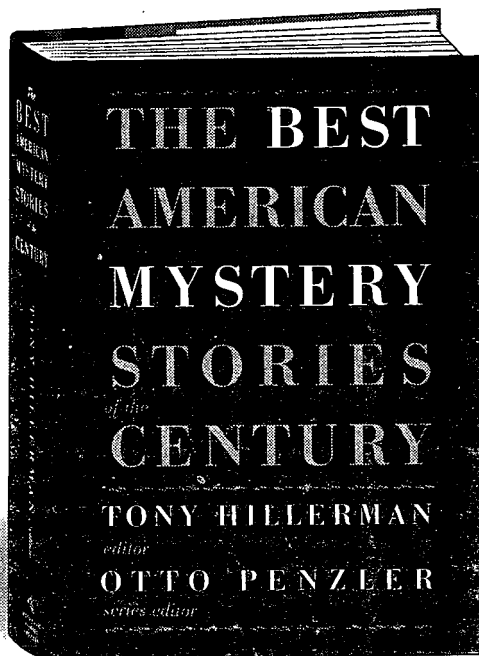
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# Tony Hillerman tracks down...



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# EDITOR'S NOTES

*Cathleen Jordan*

**W**e're pleased to say that AHMM has two nominees for the Derringer Award for Best Novella of 1999: Bentley Dadmun for "Annie's Dream" (December) and C. M. Chan for "Death in the Dales" (January). Mr. Dadmun's tales about Harry Neal and Cat and Ms. Chan's stories about English amateur sleuth Phillip Bethancourt and his Scotland Yard friend Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons are both outstanding series. It's high time they got wider recognition.

The Derringers (named "after the palm-sized handgun [and] chosen as a metaphor for a crime short story—small but dangerous") are given by a Web group, The Short Mystery Fiction Society. For other nominees and the winners, go to [www.thewindjammer.com](http://www.thewindjammer.com).

A new Harry Neal story, by the way, will be in our November issue,

and we'll bring you a new Bethancourt tale in December.

We welcome two new authors in this issue. James W. Riley, author of "Buried at Gettysburg," is really Jim Weikart, a New York tax adviser. "My pseudonym comes from a nod to the man I received my middle name [Riley] from, James Whitcomb Riley. My Indiana sheriff was inspired by his work. In my own life the closest I've been to a civil war was living for two years on the border of Mozambique as a teacher in the mid-sixties during the revolution to do away with Portuguese rule. . . . I began writing as a forest fire fighter in Idaho my junior year in college when I felt the need and urge to write down those fire experiences."

The author of "The Witch and the Relic Thief," M. J. Jones—also a pseudonym—is a retired English professor.

---

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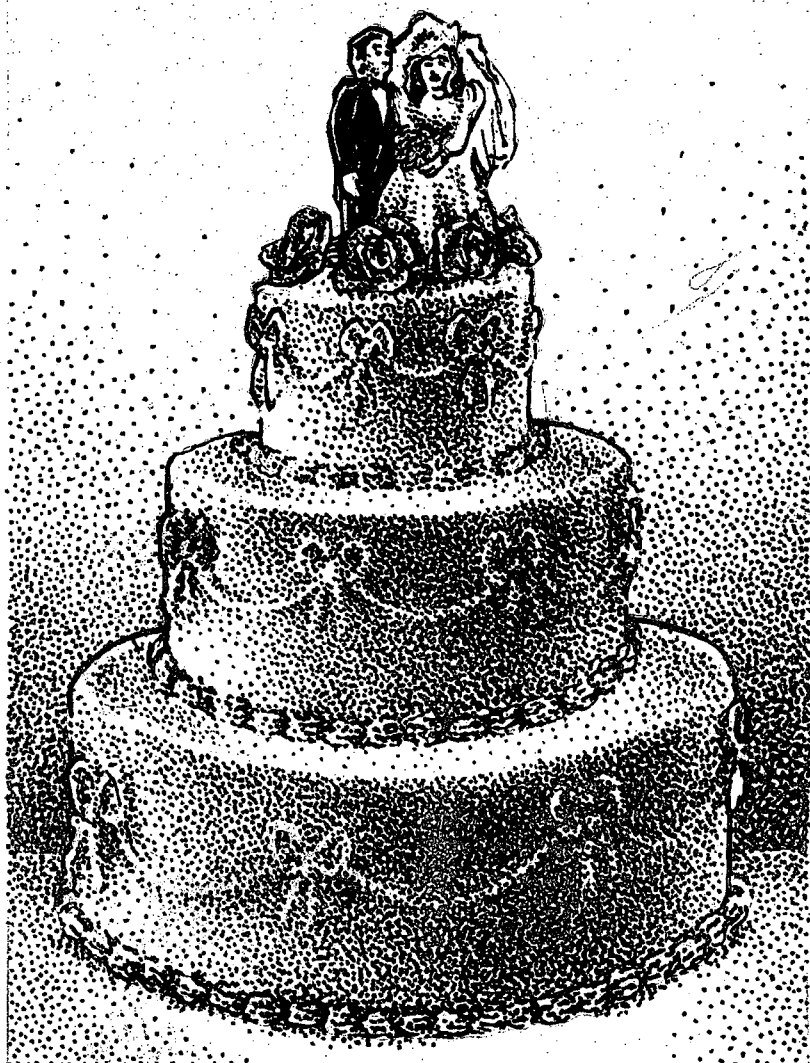
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FICTION

# MY BEST FRED MACMURRAY

Rob Kantner



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*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/00*

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Chick was never what you'd call smooth, back in the day, and the years in between sure hadn't taught him much. Because when I appeared the smart move would have been for him to hide his surprise, but he didn't.

Not that he wiggled out or anything. He was standing on the patio towering over those around him, elbows sticking out in that odd way. Drinking and chatting and making that percussive laugh of his, he caught a glimpse of me over his right shoulder. Of course it had been some years and he could not be sure it was me, and he obviously needed to check. But the smooth move would have been to wait. Not Chick. He had to know, *right that instant*. He did as I expected, as if I'd scripted it: turned to his left and shot a glance at me over his *left* shoulder.

Like I said: not smooth. He might as well have faced me and cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted *Yes, Ben, it's me, Chick Hafer, and yes, as usual I'm up to no good, no good at all.* . . .

That anything like this was about to happen I was blissfully unaware two hours earlier as we sped up a long, fine U.S. 13 hill. After all, I was on a vacation of sorts. To one of the remote reaches of the state, far from the saloons and dark alleys and smoky factories of my Detroit stomping grounds. In the most pleasant company of Ms. Raeanne, whose considerable acting skills could not smother her excitement as my Mustang flew over the crest of the hill.

She let out a whoop. "There it is! My town, my town, my *town!*" she

sang out, in her excitement shaking my gun arm.

"Welcome back, darlin'," I said, downshifting as we passed the city limits of Hope Springs. Though there were, as far as I knew, no springs to be seen, there was plenty of water. From our vantage point on U.S. 13 we had a postcard view of Lake Michigan, a deep bay, a river, and at least two lakes. The town of Hope Springs, bisected by the river, clustered on gentle hills that rolled along the bay. "Pretty place," I said.

"It sure has grown, though," Raeanne said, squinting. "I hardly recognize anything. Look at this road! It was just a two-lane when I used to visit here." Which had been, I knew, during the Reagan administration. "Guess I never realized the sprawl would make it this far north."

"So many strip malls," I observed, "so little land."

"Well," she answered confidently, "this is just the typical edge-of-town Wal-Martville," she noted, just as we passed one. "In a few minutes we'll be in the *real* Hope Springs. I'm taking you to the Gas Light District and the marinas and the parks. And the best thing is seeing the sunset at Bayfront Park. I can't wait to show you that."

"Looking forward to it," I said. I was eyeing the commercial strip as we rolled north.

"Can't wait," Raeanne mused, lost in memory. At that moment she looked half her thirty years. I got a glimpse of that long-lost teen face, oval, even more delicate but with, I was sure, more hair and less

assurance. Just then I saw what I needed and wheeled us into a driveway of a big new Pit 'n' Git. Raeanne glanced at me. "Stopping?"

"Taco salad dressing."

"Oh, right," she said, and touched my hand. "Thanks for remembering."

"Hey, I was the one left it on the kitchen counter," I replied, grinning. I eased the Mustang into a parking place. "Anything else you need?"

"No." Raeanne's hand tightened on mine. "Sure you're okay with all this? New town, new people, family stuff?"

"Hey," I said cheerily, "twice in my life, guys tried to garrote me. This I can deal with."

"Why," she breathed, smiling, "you're fairly bubbling over here!"

I smiled back. "I'm good. Really." I shut off the engine. "Back in a flash."

Disembarking from the Mustang, I sauntered toward the Pit 'n' Git. A bright orange sign on the door caught my eye as I pushed through: THIS PREMISE UNDER ARMED SURVEILLANCE, it read. OFFENDERS WILL BE MET WITH DEADLY FORCE.

Seemed a bit overdone to me. Obviously lawyers on overtime.

I found the salad dressing and walked it to the busy checkout counter. I was feeling good. Oh, I knew it'd be a bit tense, meeting Raeanne's family, what was left of it. But I knew what to do: stand around, avoid bumping into furniture, smile a lot, and in general do my best Fred MacMurray. And enjoy watching Raeanne reconnect to what she still fondly thought of as her world and her people.

Outside, I saw that she was no longer alone. A man stood by her side of the Mustang, leaning against the roof, chatting companionably with her through the open window. I recognized him right off—hell, you don't mistake guys his size, even two hundred-odd miles from where you expect them to be. "What's shakin', Hammer?" I asked as I approached the car.

Hammer Lane straightened and favored me with his flat, gray-eyed smile. He wore black jeans and a leather vest over a white T-shirt. He was still muscled like a weightlifter. Not that I'd ever seen him lift weights. Never seen him exercise. Matter of fact, I never saw him ever break so much as a sweat. "Just chattin' with your friend," he said, voice a deep gravel-rumble. "Takin' some time, Ben?"

"That would be correct," I said, as easygoing as I could manage. I'm not exactly little, but he made me feel puny. He unleaned himself from my car without being asked, though. "You?"

"Workin'." He bent down to the window and gave Raeanne a tiny salute. "Enjoy your visit, Ms. Brennan." Then he strolled into the Pit 'n' Git, a big family parting like a sea to make way for him. I slammed my door, handed Raeanne the dressing, and started the engine.

"Hammer Lane?" she drawled as I backed out of the parking space. "Please tell me that's not his real name."

"Haven't a clue," I said, scooting us over to U.S. 13. "Some people think he was a long-haul trucker once. Truckers call the passing lane



the hammer lane. Somebody once told me he ran a drop forge at a hammer factory, about the nastiest, most dangerous job there is. Heard tell elsewhere he was in the fight game, got the name that way. Another guy claimed Hammer was drummer for the Syndicate of Sound band. There was even a wild tale of him playing pro ball. And then there's women that describe Hammer as being—

"Thank you," she cut in sardonically. "That image I can live with-out." She eyed me. "So how do you know him?"

"Um, him and me did union to-gether."

"Oh."

I flung us out onto the road, merging smoothly into a small gap among the campers and RV's. I'd tell her anything she wanted to know, but there were parts of my past about which she hesitated to ask, and my policy was not to push. "About my being comfortable doing this?"

"Yes?"

"Remember back Easter, when my sister invited us to her house? You told me you were happy to do it. That not everything we did had to be about you."

"I remember."

"Well, darlin'," I said, looking into her light eyes, "I'm happy to do this. Not everything we do has to be about me."

Impulsively she leaned over and kissed my cheek hard. "I'm grateful," she whispered. "More than you know."

"Pleasure." Almost at once our motel came up on the right, and I

swerved us into the parking lot. "Just surprises me," I said, "running into a Detroit mope all the way up here."

"Doesn't surprise me," Raeanne replied. "Everybody around here is either from around here or from Detroit somewhere."

**T**wo Detroit mopes as it turned out. Three if you count me.

But I was still ten minutes from spotting Chick as we motored up the driveway of Raeanne's uncle's property north of town. It looked like a nice spread: rolling hills, dense woods, miles of white fence, a glimpse of the bay way to the west. Raeanne supplied excited narrative as we made our way, images from her adolescence: a tire swing, a creek, a pond, and a pig near whom, she said, she and her cousin made mud pies as little girls. I looked real hard but saw no pigs. Which did not surprise me. Earlier, as we'd neared Hope Springs, Raeanne had twice spotted deer near the road, but try as I might I could not see them. "City eyes," she'd called me, laughing.

The house was a sprawling, dark brick, low-slung affair. It needed new shingles but was otherwise quite nice, with big windows looking at odd angles out at all those woods. The vast apron of asphalt driveway was parked solid with vehicles, with emphasis on red, silver, chrome, shiny, and huge. Among them my '71 Mustang looked small and quaint and "then," to use Raeanne's term.

Getting out of the car, I saw that

the party had taken over the whole place. The double front doors stood wide open, as did the windows and the doors to the triple bay garage. Inside there, tables stood in rows, covered with bright tablecloths and dishes and containers of food and beverages, which were being fluttered over by people, mostly female. From inside boomed music, big band stuff, overlaying a steady but perceptible drone of loud, cheery conversation. On the concrete stoop stood a flock of men, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer from cans and watching us speculatively. At our appearance one ducked into the house. "Ready for this?" Raeanne asked, getting her big covered salad bowl out of the back seat.

"Into the breach," I answered cheerfully, shutting the car door.

She waited for me to join her, and we walked toward the garage together. "I hope they like my salad," she said nervously. "It's what Aunt Barb told me to bring."

"It'll be fine."

"It's just . . . there's nothing more depressing than taking most of your uneaten potluck dish back home with you."

"They'll love it, sweetheart. They'll eat every bite and lick the bowl clean, if need be at gunpoint."

"Now, stop it. . . . Oh!" she said tremblingly, spotting movement in the garage, "Here she comes, *here-she-coooooomes!*" Thrusting the salad bowl into my arms, she ran toward the garage as a woman shot toward us, red hair flying in the wind. Colliding, they did a hugging, circling dance, seeming to cry and laugh at once, the blended sounds

almost musical. As I approached, Raeanne broke free but held both hands with the much shorter woman as she turned to me. "This is my cousin Shay. Shay Hatrick. Soon to be Shay—"

"Wardwell," Shay supplied, beaming.

"It's so exciting!" Raeanne bubbled.

"I know, I know!" and they hugged again. Then Shay's eyes found me. "You must be Ben!"

"Perkins," I answered, grinning. "Glad to meetcha."

"Same here," she said, and the look she gave me was more a check-up than a glance. Which was okay. I clean up pretty good when required. I wore slacks and sneakers and some sort of golf shirt. I'd trimmed my thicket of coarse black hair back to something like civilized. Back in the room I'd even shaved—violating Commandment One of "time off." Shay seemed to find me acceptable. "Come inside, you two, Mother's dying to see you."

She led us through the garage. Greetings were exchanged, introductions made. I stayed what athletes call "within myself," nodding and smiling and murmuring pleasant inconsequentials. When directed, I placed the salad in what appeared to be a plastic kiddie pool full of ice. Then I followed the woman into the house.

The family room was sprawling and all glass at the south end, with a large wood deck just outside, a concrete patio beyond, and a swimming pool in the next township. Children cavorted, teens bunched in suspicious, murmuring clusters,

and adults stood in clumps, outside and in. From the nearest, an older bright-blond woman turned and, spotting us, shouted, "So *there* you are!" Shay led us over. That was when I saw Chick out on the deck and he did his ridiculously obvious *yes-I-see-you-no-I-don't* act.

Raeanne hugged the older woman, who as it turned out was Aunt Barb, Shay's mom. "So nice to meet you," she said, giving me just her heavily ringed fingers to shake. She looked a little like a blonde Lauren Bacall: "You're from Detroit somewhere?"

"Belleville, ma'am. Congratulations on marrying off the kid here."

"Well, it's about time!" the mom boomed. "I told Shay, I said, by the time I was your age I'd already *had* my starter marriage." The mother's sharp eyes found Raeanne. "I told her, I said, 'Whatsa matter with you? Even gawky Rae's had *one* marriage already, even if the best she could do was a man as poor as a churchmouse.'"

"True," Raeanne said equably. "So where's the lucky boy?"

"Oh, out on the deck with Mike," Shay replied, tossing her red head that way. "Wanna meet him?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Ben," Mrs. Hatrick commanded, "you need to meet my boys over here. Get your quota of man-talk out of the way."

"Back in a bit," Raeanne said, giving me a *good luck* wink. She and her cousin headed off arm in arm toward the deck—and Chick Hafer. I wondered again what the heck he was doing here.

Mrs. Hatrick introduced me to

several men of varying ages: her husband, two of her sons, a male in-law. Don't ask me their names; they flitted across my brain and skipped right out again. The dad was bald all over; one of the sons had a badly bruised face; the other son was small-eyed and portly; and the in-law had a goatee.

Introductions done, the mom churned noisily away. I really wanted to go out on the deck and check up on Chick, but—*this is not about you*—it would have been rude to just walk off on these guys. There was an interval of awkwardness as the group adjusted to my sudden appearance.

Then the dad said, watching them, "Rae and Shay. The Bobbsey twins."

"Twins? More like a study in contrast, Dad," the portly one said. He was right. Raeanne was a good half foot taller than her cousin, with a willowy build, short dark brown hair, and a loose-limbed way of walking. Shay was solid and freckled with longish, brilliantly red hair, a small pursed mouth, and a strut for a walk.

"From Detroit somewhere, Ben?" asked the bruised one.

"Belleville. Thirty miles west."

"What's this rumor Rae had a part in *Good Will Hunting*?" the dad asked me.

"Yeah, what was she, an extra in the bar scene?" the bruised one put in. "I played the whole tape in slo-mo, never saw her."

"Her scene was cut," I said. "It's on the DVD, though."

"So've the dizzy spells stopped?" goatee asked the bruised one.



"She had a whole scene?" the dad asked me.

"Yopp, I'm doing better," the bruised one said.

"Her and Ben Affleck," I answered. "She got to kiss him. Many times."

From out on the deck I heard Chick's hard, percussive laugh. My daddy would have growled, *That boy couldn't sneak up on a war.*

"When do you start back?" the portly one asked.

"What kind of work do you do, Ben?" asked goatee.

"Monday week I'm back there," the bruised one said.

"Manage maintenance for an apartment complex," I answered.

"Light duty?" the portly one asked.

"Not much money in that, is there?" Goatee said to me.

"So," I said to the dad, "I hear you've got pigs on the place?"

The dad laughed. "Only pig I've got is the propane gas tank out past the garage."

"Yuh-huh," the bruised one said, "till they figure out about the dizzy spells."

"What happened to you?" I asked him. "Bar fight?"

"Deer," the dad said.

"Hit a deer," the bruised one said off-handedly and added, "Button buck," as if that explained anything.

"With your face?" I asked.

"Uh-uh," the man answered. "My car. Deer came cartwheeling over the hood, crashed through the windshield feet first, and got stuck half in, half out. I'm swerving all over the road, can't see for the deer in my face. And he's hurt and mad as hell, just kicking the bejeepers out of me."

"Whyncha just shoot him?"

"Outa season," the dad said, fetching a laugh.

"Woulda been poaching," the portly one chortled.

"Hey," I shrugged, "if a deer's kicking the crap out of me, where I come from, shooting him wouldn't be poaching, it'd be self-defense."

Goatee, whom I made as a lawyer, said, "To do that, you'd have to have a loaded gun on your front seat. That's illegal."

"It is?" I asked blankly.

"Ben" came Raeanne's voice. I turned. Smiling, Raeanne said, "This is Shay's fiancé." Sticking out my hand, I looked way, way up into the beaming face of Chick Hafer as Raeanne said, "Meet Bill Wardwell."

**T**he Hatrick elders convened the family in the garage to say grace. People trooped through the potluck line, paper plates in hand, and loaded up chow. Then everyone sat down to eat, grouped by family unit at picnic tables and elsewhere on the property.

Raeanne and I drew a picnic table on the driveway with Shay, her brother Mike, and Chick Haf—excuse me, Bill Wardwell. Much of the conversation was carried by the women, chattering about the wedding the next day and the reception afterward and the "fabulous" (Shay's term) Las Vegas honeymoon impending. Mike and Chi—Bill, Bill, *Bill*—talked about the family machinery business, which Mike evidently ran now, his father being pretty much retired. Mike was an older and heavier version of his

redheaded sister, unlike her a bit on the sweet and dreamy side. He was obviously great pals with you-know-who, judging by the way he listened to him, deferred to him, hung on his every word.

Speaking of Chick—for that's who he was; to me he was no more "Bill Wardwell" than Winston Churchill—he really had not changed much in the dozen years since I'd seen him. He'd always dolled himself up, and today was no exception. I had to admit he looked great in white open-neck shirt and shorts with loose gold chains at neck and wrists. He still had that athletic build and squarish head and those eager, questing eyes. His sharklike mouth wore the constant smile that he learned by watching other people and then practicing in the mirror. His laugh was an aural version of a drive-by shooting, an assault on the ears that made you want to duck for cover. When his talk was not about money and things—talk in which he was eagerly joined by his blushing bride—it was about his exploits in business, politics, finance, high-stakes gambling, and playing semi-pro basketball in Greece. He held the table rapt as he spun his glib, glowing sentences, maintaining eye contact with each of us, even looking me innocently in the face as he reeled off one whopper after another.

I was getting fidgety. This wasn't about me, and I was supposed to stay within myself here. But I found it hard to sit still and, as if signing off, listen to his blizzard of b.s. At the same time I marveled at his ability to act as though he didn't

know that I knew exactly who he was, what he was, where he'd been, what he'd done.

I wondered why others didn't see the truth of him as clearly as I did. I wondered how he'd wormed his way into the confidence of this obviously affluent and successful family. I wondered how he'd survived his eighteen months in Jackson. I wondered if he'd ever made restitution. I wondered why someone had not, long since, shot him through the head. Just in the interest of nuisance removal.

But I kept a lid on it. Not my issue, not my problem. And not my family. And not my occasion. *Not about me.*

After awhile Chick or Bill or whatever, who had managed to empty his plate even during his virtually nonstop talking, got up for seconds. Without thinking about it, I got up also and carried my plate over to the buffet tables. I found him by himself, towering over the array of food, serving himself some Jell-O. "So Bill, hey. Tell me," I said, scanning the serving dishes. "What's the crime situation in these parts?"

Chick said, "Oh, there's no crime here. Not like—you're from Detroit somewhere, right?"

"Yeah," I said, watching him.

"I'm sorry," he beamed down at me.

I saw that Raeanne's taco salad was about half gone. I served myself two big heaps of it and started to eat as we chatted. "Nothing to be sorry about," I said. "Aren't you from Detroit?"

"Me?" he snorted. "Oh hell, no. Petoskey." He seemed to shiver. "I

wouldn't go anywhere near that hellhole down there."

"Uh-huh," I said, eating. "So you're working for Mike, I gather? What do you do for him?"

"Executive V-P of marketing administration," he crowed, glancing over the rest of the dishes.

"Oughta try the taco salad," I said off-hand. "You didn't eat any before."

"Sure I did!" he boomed. "It was great! But I'm just—"

"No, you didn't. I was watching," I said easily. "But okay, let's pretend you did. In that case, it's time for seconds. Help yourself!"

He looked down at me, grin white and wide. "Oh, I don't know, I should leave some for—"

"Take some more," I suggested. He just looked at me. "I really think you should." His mouth moved, but before he could emit words, I said softly, "It's highly advisable."

"Well," he managed. "Sure! Sure, why not. Ya twisted my arm!"

Laughing percussively, he piled a couple of scoops of taco salad on his plate. With a glance at me he added one more. Then, having suddenly and mysteriously run out of achievements to trumpet, victories to proclaim, or toys to brag about, he scooted back over to our table, where he sat next to Shay, closer than before. I finished my plate, tossed it in a trash barrel, then resumed my place beside Raeanne. I found myself rubbing my hands aimlessly on my pants, as if to ease an itch for Chick's neck. I did not know how Fred MacMurray would have handled this. What I did was go into one-minute-at-a-time mode. Let Chick finish Raeanne's salad

first, I told myself. *Then* you can strangle him. . . .

"Wow," Raeanne said, warmly pleased. "My salad got wiped out!"

"They loved it, babe," I said, guiding the car down the driveway. "It was great."

"I didn't make enough," she fussed, placing the bowl in the back seat.

"That's right," I said, grinning, "keep digging, you're bound to find a defeat in there somewhere."

She laughed. "Yeah, yeah. You're right." I swung the car right, onto the main road headed back into town. "So are you going to the bachelor party?"

"Doubt it. You wanted to show me the sunset."

"Ohhh yes."

"Besides, I think Mike invited me because he felt he had to."

"Mike's a sweetie."

"I'm not in the least opposed to an alcohol-soaked debauch," I told her. "Just not with people I don't know."

"Then don't go. It's fine with me. I'm piggy. I want you with me." I felt her hand on mine. "Now, are you going to tell me about it?"

"'Bout what?"

She looked at me and I looked back. The late afternoon sunlight angled the delicate features of her oval face. Her expression was calm, expectant. "Why you're in such a state."

"Well—"

"Please, Ben. I can tell. You know

how this works. When you love someone, you pay attention."

It was not that I had decided not to tell her. I was learning I could tell Raeanne anything—anything at all. I just hadn't figured out the right time. Looked like she'd decided that for me.

"Wardwell's not his real name," I told her. "It's Hafer. Chick Hafer."

"Oh," she said presently. "You know him?" Then she interrupted herself. "*Chick?*"

"Short for Charles," I said as we passed the Hope Springs city limits. The road four-laned there, following a high bluff over the expanse of bay stretching out to Lake Michigan. "I knew him, sort of. Years ago."

"A case, I take it?"

"Yep. He was the perp."

"Oh boy," she said. Crossing her legs under her skirt, she braced her chin on her fist, and let out a soft sigh. "What kind of case?"

"He stole some antiques from my client, an elderly woman, from a house she owned. Years ago now. She was renting the place to his girlfriend, it's a long story."

"So he ended up—"

"Prison," I told her. "Caught five to eight, did eighteen months. The girl flipped on him and got probation. My client got some of her stuff back. Not all of it. Chick was supposed to make restitution, but who knows."

We paused at a traffic signal in the center of town, signaling to bear left on U.S. 13. Raeanne looked thoughtful. "And this was when?"

"Wanna say, twelve years ago," I answered, lunging the Mustang onward.

"Long time."

I knew what she was thinking. I was having the same thoughts. But there was more information she needed.

"Thing is, I learned a lot about him. I had to testify, I was in and out of it for months—anyway, this wasn't just a one-shot. Chick's been grifting and scamming and pulling fast ones since he was a kid. Got a sheet as long as your arm."

"What kind of offenses?"

"That's the thing, nothing really big. Consumer fraud. Credit card scams. He was always kind of reckless, he got caught a lot. Like the antiques case—he knew he was suspected, went right on stealing anyways." I realized I was overshooting the motel just as it happened. Banging the shifter into second, I gunned us into the Pit 'n' Git driveway and U'd back over to the road. "This ain't no evil genius, this schmo," I said, looking at Raeanne. "He's not so much evil as pathetic, with these scummy little scams of his."

"Just the same, sounds like he's hurt a lot of people." She drew a deep breath. "Could be he's reformed since then."

We motored back to the motel driveway. "Hey. Maybe. Anything's possible." To that my instinct said a loud and clear *no*, but I kept that to myself. "It's been twelve years," I added. "My information is a tad dusty."

"I just . . . feel so bad for Shay," Raeanne said. "I wonder if she knows."

We parked, got out, walked toward the motel. "Well, we know she knows him by a wrong name," I



pointed out, taking her warm hand in mine. "And look at all this other stuff he told us today, stuff she obviously believes. MBA from Michigan? Born and raised in Petoskey? Father a heart surgeon? Crewed for Ted Turner in the America's Cup race? Semi-pro basketball in Greece? All false."

I don't know how much of that she heard because her head was somewhere else. "She's *marrying* him, Ben. Tomorrow."

"I know."

Inside the room she sprawled on the lone double bed. I opened a window to get the good lake breeze and lighted a cigar, leaning, watching her. Eyes shut, she massaged her forehead with her slender fingers. "Please don't be insulted at this question," she said to the ceiling, "but . . . is there *any* possibility of mistaken identity?"

"Babe," I said quietly.

"It's been *twelve years*," she said, emphasizing the words with small clenched fists. "You've seen a lot of people, done a lot of—"

"Sweetheart," I said, "in this work you remember the wrong guys a hell of a lot longer than the citizens. And Chick, in my humble opinion, was about as wrong as they come. Back then anyways," I amended, extending the benefit of the doubt in which I did not for one moment believe.

We sat there silent for a long, long time. I smoked, being sure to vent out the window. I felt bad about this. Raeanne had looked forward to Shay's wedding for so very long. She so badly wanted everything to work out all right. It just

made me angrier at Chick—*still* messing up people's lives after all these years.

And speaking of which. "But if he's reformed," I ventured, "I might know how to find out."

"How?" she said, looking at me.

"Fella down home. Knows all the scam artists around town, he's a walkin' NCIC database. If Chick is still scamming, T. Tommy'll know. Same if he's gone straight."

"Know what?" Raeanne said, getting up lithely from the bed, "I think I'm going to take a walk down to the marina and back. Try to clear my head."

"Sure." I stood also. "Want me to make the call?" She said nothing, just walked pensively toward the motel room door. "I'll do anything for you," I said. "All the way out to everything, and all the way back to nothing at all. Your call."

She looked very directly at me. "Call," she answered, and left.

**U**nless you do business with him regularly, which I do not, there is never any way to reach T. Tommy Fledderjohn directly. You have to know people who know him. These need to be people who not only know you, and know that T. Tommy knows you, they must also know he is willing to talk to you. So it gets a little complicated. On top of that, you're dealing with people who lack, besides abstractions like morals and ethics, fixed addresses, voice mail, family, secretaries. So I had to work my way through a thicket of handoffs and no-answers and *the number you*

*have reached is not in service* records to get to T. Tommy.

Who came on the phone, voice deep, bubbly, rich as always. "Why Mistah Benjamin Perkins!" he boomed, his mellow tones harking back to his Mississippi Delta upbringing. "What brings you into my den of iniquity?"

I pictured him in that huge executive chair behind the desk on the second floor of an East Grand Boulevard mansion. Of course, that place had to be long gone by now—for all I knew he was in a double-wide in Melvindale. But my guess was, he still wore big thick black-framed glasses on his large round face and had quadruple chins and a whale-like physique. "Got a name for ya, maybe you can help me out with," I said.

"Happy to be of service."

"Chick Hafer."

"Aaugh!" he barked shortly. If I weren't mistaken, I thought I heard pain in his voice, if briefly. "Hafer, sure, I know of him. You can take *that* to the bank. Truly a *pitiful* little snot, Ben."

"This is what I hate about you, T., the way I have to drag information out of you."

"Why," T. Tommy said, "he had a score going perhaps two, three years ago, something to do with the Internet. I don't recall all the details," he said, which by definition was a huge lie. "Bottom line is that things 'somehow' went awry. Several good friends of mine, his ostensible partners, were incarcerated, my best intercessory efforts notwithstanding."

"He set them up?"

"You know, I had that very same

quite uncharitable and un-Christian thought," T. Tommy boomed. "And were I a man given to violence, such as yourself, Ben, and of an unforgiving nature, I might have been forced to exact physical retribution. Why, I almost called you, my friend, I truly did. Perhaps to arrange for you to provide Mr. Hafer with one of your nigh legendary face-first staircase slides. But—"

"Heck, T., it's been decades since —"

"But then I had a moment of clarity," T. Tommy said. "And realized that Mr. Chick Hafer doesn't have the intellectual horsepower to carry out a con within a con. He can, however, and has proved it on many an occasion, screw up a perfectly good con. You can take that to the *bank*. So I let him live, digits intact."

"What I need to know is, is he in the business or out of it or what?"

"On the fringes! Like always! He works the low-rent crowd, the elderly and infirm, for nickels and dimes. Not that he doesn't continue to have grander ambitions, but—"

"But not real lately, am I right?"

The big man hesitated. "Matter of fact, it's probably been a year, year and a half, since I heard tell of him. He was working the smack at the airport then, I know that. Got a little obvious—which at six foot seven isn't hard—and that idiot laugh of his, he's been ticketed for violating *noise* ordinances. He drew ninety days for loitering, which we found to be hilarious. Since then, nothing."

"Well, I know where he is," I said, and told him. "What do you think?"

"You're thinking perhaps he's gone straight," T. Tommy said shrewdly.

"Just wonderin'."

"Ben," he said gruffly, "please. Bent Hafer was born, and bent he'll always be. Till he's three days dead, that is. I'll tell you what he's doing, and *this* you can take to the bank. Your friend Chick has always thirsted for the big con. Wants to be a master of the universe, so to speak. What he's doing—and I guarantee this is true, even in a place like—where the hell are you again?"

"Hope Springs."

"Oh, Ben," he moaned, "a godforsaken backwater like that? I'll send my car for you at once."

"My sweetheart's family is here, we're—"

"I might have known!" he boomed. "That was always your failing. Skirt. When *will* you learn."

"When I'm three days dead," I answered, thinking of Raeanne with a smile. "But what about Chick?"

"My bet is he's got a mark," T. Tommy said. "A rather substantial one. And he's working him. Maybe not so much for the dough but to prove to the rest of us that—"

"Any way you can get a line on exactly who he's doing?" I asked, not that I didn't have a theory.

"Not way out there, not anytime soon."

I found myself believing him, not that it mattered. "Okay. Appreciate the insight."

"Remember," T. Tommy said. "Chick Hafer is two things. No, three. Greedy, stupid, and impulsive. The first two I could live with—hell, they make my business pos-

sible! It's the third that makes him dangerous. You just never know when he's going to fly off in some direction."

"Thanks, T. I'll keep that in mind. And thanks for leveling with me," I added, not sure that he completely had. Raeanne returned just then, looking sober and thoughtful as she eased into one of the club chairs by the window. I fielded some questions from T. Tommy about certain Detroit area figures, and we signed off. To Raeanne's arched eyebrow I responded by filling her in.

"So he's still, uh . . . what's your word for it? Dirty?" she asked.

"Yep. Dirty."

She shook her head slightly, expression bleak. "It's just awful. So awful for Shay."

"I know. What do you want to do?"

She glanced around the room as if seeking an escape route. "I could sit down with her. Tell her what's up."

"Yeah, you could. And there's something I could do, too."

"What's that?"

"Talk to Chick. Convince him to back off whatever he's up to."

"How would you do that?" I just looked at her. "Oh."

"Again, it's your call," I said, re-lighting my expired cigar, swiveling on the sill to blow smoke out the window.

"You mean," she said, with a very small smile, "you'd actually go do *enforcing* for me?"

"I'll do anything for you."

Smile fading, she slouched in the chair spraddle-legged, fingers drumming the chair arm. "There's another whole way to look at this."

"Yes?"

"It's not our problem." She studied her hands as she spoke in a soft, certain voice. "All we have are strands of things. We don't know the whole story. Not really."

"True."

"And," she went on, looking at me, "it's not like Shay and I are boon companions. Since we were kids, it's been Christmas cards and a phone call here and there. Why, she didn't even come sit with me when my dad died."

That did not surprise me, given the low-key, disparaging remarks I'd heard about Raeanne's dad back the potluck. "You're under no obligation," I told her.

"What right do we have," she asked rhetorically, "to come blazing into town and upset everything and everyone on Shay's wedding weekend?" She held her hands out, palms up. "This is not about us."

"Right. Not about us."

"So," she said, clapping hands once and standing, "let's go eat and watch the sunset."

**W**hich we did. And it was great. But Raeanne seemed to be at most half with it.

The only time she became fully engaged was during Sean Ryan's performance at the Elbow Room. He spotted her in the crowd and called her over between sets. After much giggling and whispering she strapped on his twelve-string, and the two of them opened his second set with a killer duet of "She Came In Through the Bathroom Window." The crowd loved it and demanded

an encore. Raeanne obliged with a solo of "When All Is Sad and Done," which got hearty applause also, though no one but me had heard it before.

Awhile later we walked silently, hand in hand, up Lee Street toward the hotel. I could sense the percolation of her thoughts. When she spoke, though, she asked a question I didn't expect. "Did you have a good time at my uncle's today?"

"Yeah. Sure. It was all right. You?"

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "I guess. It's just . . . they're not the way I remember them."

"People change."

"Some," she said distractedly. We walked a bit more, crossed a busy street, homed in on the motel. That was when she got down to it. "You know?"

"Yeah," I agreed.

We looked at each other with complete understanding. "I have to at least tell her what we know," she said. "She deserves that."

"And I need a word with him, too," I answered. "If I can do some good, I gotta at least try. It's what I'm about, if anything."

"I know," she said, voice small. "God knows I don't want to bring it up to her. But I love her, and this is the loving thing to do, even if it's such a very hard thing."

"Don't envy you," I told her. "I've got the easy end of it."

She let go of my hand as I gave her the room key. Kissing me lightly on the lips, she said, "Don't hurt him, okay?"

"Just a little chit-chat," I assured her, and headed for the car.

I arrived at the bachelor party just in time for the obligatory stripper bit.

The meeting hall of Hope Springs Chapter 1957 of the Amalgamated Brotherhood of Standpipe, Spigot & Stopcock Fabricators, Fitters, Formers & Threaders was a small, dim building in the town's tiny Colony Street industrial district, well uphill from the bay. The gravel lot was parked solid with muscle cars and pickups all parked nose out.

Hard rock pounding through the open windows sounded coarse and brutalizing after an hour of listening to the lilting ballads of Sean Ryan. But that was okay. This place, this situation, felt familiar, comfortable. For the next little while, I thought, feeling myself smile, I would be back in my own world.

No one noticed me as I came through the door. The room was a large, low oblong, fluorescent-lit, with a portable bar to the right and padded folding chairs scattered around. Blinded windows spotted the walls. A hallway ran off the room way to the left. Two dozen men packed the center in a dense, smoky huddle, making appreciative noise against the blaring music backdrop. The object of their adoration was a tiny nude blonde woman just finishing her athletic dance on the lap of the sweating, beaming Chick Hafer.

The bartender, who doubled as the deejay, was engrossed in the action. Finally I stepped around and drew myself a glass of beer, being familiar with the technology. He glanced at me and started to

express himself but thought better of it. I strolled over to some chairs by the wall beneath the big blue and gold union banner, drank some beer, and waited. I did not light up; the secondhand smoke was doing me just fine. Presently the song ended, and the blonde sprang from Chick's lap. She bussed his cheek and ruffled his hair as the men clapped and whooped and bayed. Then she slipped his roaming mitts and dashed barefoot out of the room down the hall for the johns, G-string and pasties in hand.

The men flooded toward the bar, flushed and animated and chattering loudly. Mike Hatrick, Shay's brother, spotted me and veered over. "Hey, Ben, glad you could make it!" he said, shaking hands with me unsteadily.

"Thought I'd stop by," I said. "Good of you to invite me."

"Oh, it's the best!" Mike said for some reason. He was having trouble focusing on me, and his lips and tongue seemed rubbery. "Y'know I wouldn't of blamed you for not coming, not with Rae to be with. Any man she cares for is best friends of me. She's the greatest, I just love her swilly—stilly—silly."

Chick was on his feet and headed toward us, elbows out. I had my plan and knew it was just a matter of time. "She loves you, too, Mike," I told Hatrick.

"Bill!" Mike said to Chick. "Look what the cat drug in!"

Hafer drew up and beamed down at us with his big oblong grin. His white golf shirt was dampish and he had a liquor glass in hand, but I was certain he was stone cold so-



ber. All to the good. "Hi, Ben," he said.

"Bill!" Mike said, bumping against his much taller colleague. "About the fight later, what do you say, let's ask Ben along. Bet he's got a big Detroit wad on his hip, and—"

"No, no," Chick said, clapping a big hand on Mike's shoulder. "You just, uh, go fetch me a refill, huh, Mike?" he told the company president, thrusting his glass into the smaller man's hand. "I gotta go squirt." Wheeling on his heel, he strode across the room toward the corridor.

Mike smirked at me and gestured helplessly with Chick's glass and headed over to the bar. I let Chick disappear down the dark hallway to the right, then set my glass down and ambled along. Halfway down the hall, a string mop leaned against the wall. Handy. Liberating it, I swung into the men's room.

It was a three-holer, painted green and thick, two stools inside enclosures and an honest to God trough. Chick towered over the latter, just buttoning up. When he saw it was me, he flashed a deer-in-the-headlights look. Then managed to replace that with a fairly sincere leer. "Pretty well-made young lady out there, huh, Ben?" he asked, going to the sinks.

Without answering, I snapped the mop handle in two, tossed the string part into the corner, and leaned against the door, tapping the splintered end in my palm. "Chick," I said, making it a statement.

He froze in place, staring at me as the water ran over his hands. "What the hell," he said.

"Can we talk," I said, making that a statement also.

"Whaddaya mean 'Chick,' " he said, mimicking my tone.

"Please!" I said, rapping the handle overly hard in my palm. "Everybody's not dumb."

He blinked once, twice, three times, and then grinned. "So you do remember me." He seemed flattered.

"Chick. My man. You're six foot seven. You got elbows stick out funny. Your laugh could knock over a Brink's truck. Plus you stole antiques and family mementos from a helpless old lady. Guys like you I remember."

"I did my time," he said, voice low. "I'm on the square now."

"And got yourself quite a nice deal here."

He started washing his hands, and his eyes flickered to me. "You putting the arm on me, Ben? To, uh, buy your silence?"

"I got a transaction in mind, all right," I answered. "But not that kind."

He shook his hands over the sink. "Things are good for me here," he said. "My straight gig and Shay and . . . you can't mess that up for me. It's not fair. I did my time."

"Straight gig?"

"With the company. You know. Working for Mike." He started to dry. "So what kind of 'transaction' you thinking of?"

"Very simple. You pull the plug, and I go away."

"The plug? On what?"

"The game."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Aw, jeez." I gestured at him with

the mop handle, and he stepped back, clenching wadded towels, wary eyes worried despite himself. I said, "I don't care about your job and Shay—all that you can keep. But the game you're running? That stops. This instant."

"I'm not running a game! I told you! I'm—"

"Do you remember when I first saw you? At the house you were living in with Gretchen Philbrick? The one with the antiques you stole?" I could tell he remembered very well. It was all he'd thought about, probably, since seeing me at the potluck. "The minute I saw you, I knew you. I knew what you were about, what you were doing. I knew it all, chapter and verse. And I was right. And why was I right, Chick?"

He swallowed hard. "I don't—I'm—"

"Because I OWN you!" I shouted. "I see right through you. Right through the blather and the b.s. You're an open book to me, Chick. I knew what you were up to then, and I know what's going on now. And I'm saying to you: pull the plug on it. Forthwith."

Looking me over from his greater height, Chick gnawed his lip.

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay, it's off." Turning to the wastebasket, he jammed the paper towels into it unnecessarily hard.

Hiding my surprise, I pointed the jagged mop handle at him. "You got the message then."

"Yeah, sure." He looked at me earnestly. "Nobody was getting hurt. Not really. They got plenty."

"And they're entitled to keep what

they have," I said, winging it like crazy.

"Spare me the lectures," he said quietly. "You're no angel either. Can I leave now?"

We stared at each other, and then I stood back. "Sure, why not." He left. I threw the mop handle into the corner, went to the sink, and washed my hands. The black-haired gent with the deep blue eyes staring at me from the mirror looked troubled, and I knew why. I had the uneasy feeling that I'd been finessed. But then, what I'd come to do was to deliver a message. Beyond that, all I could do was hurt him, which Raeanne in her own offhand way had commanded me not to do. Besides, he'd given me no reason to.

Damn.

Inside our motel room, Shay and Raeanne were sitting on the edge of the sofa, knee to knee, four hands clasped. Raeanne, I could tell, was on the verge of tears. Shay was trying not to look annoyed. "Oops," I said. "Bad timing. I'll come back."

"No, stay," Shay said rapidly and let go of Raeanne. "Rae says you've—"

"I just told her," Raeanne said, tense and expressionless. "I'm so sorry about this, Shay."

The redhead crossed one sturdy leg over the other and folded her arms, bright blue eyes never leaving me. "You're the one found this out?"

"Yes, ma'am. I really didn't want to cause—"

"I thought you were just a janitor or something."

"That, plus I do a little detecting

here and there. Met him way back in—

"Don't bother," she said, a shrug in her voice. "I know all about it."

"Oh," Raeanne said.

"He told me a long time ago," Shay said, tossing her head, sweeping her long red hair back over her shoulders, watching the middle distance. "Bill and I don't have any secrets from each other."

"That's good then," Raeanne gave Shay a hug, which was not returned. "I've been so worried."

"Well, don't be," her cousin answered, standing. "It's quite all right, it's all in the past." She walked toward me; Raeanne, hands twisted together, was in her trail. "So all your research was for nothing," she told me.

"Just a phone call," I answered, giving her room.

She swept past, and sang cheerfully, "Well, kids, I've got to fly. Big day tomorrow."

"Sleep tight," I answered, going to the sofa. Raeanne escorted her cousin to the hallway. I heard murmuring from there, then the click of the door. Presently Raeanne came back into the room. Her long arms, down at her sides, ended in small fists. The set of her oval face reminded me of her portrayal of Clara, the scorned wife in *Life, Part 2*. She did not say anything, just stood by the TV staring off into space.

"What," I said.

"Why," she said quietly and with great precision, "that sneaky little lying sack of snot."

"What," I repeated.

"She didn't know."

"You think?"

"I *know*! She *didn't* know! She didn't have a clue! It came as a total surprise to her!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"Hey," she answered, "I know acting when I see it."

The wedding was held the next afternoon and it went fine. The radiant couple, wearing all white like John and Yoko, pledged their troth at the front of a banquet room at the country club. The officiant was a district judge; the attendants members of Shay's family; the witnesses a packed mob of well-dressed people seated on folding chairs. Having had experience at appearing before judges, Chick was stiff and formal. Everyone else was quite cheery. Shay in particular could not conceal her exuberance. Even from where the ushers had seated Raeanne and me, toward the back of the hall, a long way away from the family, I could hear her gleeful tones. At the end of the recessional ("Trumpet Voluntary," what else), as Shay and her new husband swept out the back, I distinctly heard her say, "Hey, that wasn't so bad!"

The reception was held in a separate banquet hall equipped with two buffet lines, bandstand, dance floor, and several eight-rounds clothed in white. The bride, groom, and family sat at a long table at the front, dominated by the triple-tiered wedding cake. Raeanne and I were assigned to an eight-round about as far from the food as you could get. During dinner Shay and Chick made the rounds of the tables. They never bothered to come by ours.

I couldn't tell if Raeanne had picked up on any of this. She cheerily chatted with our tablemates—some distant relatives of Shay's mother, and a couple of Mike's machinery firm customers. I just stayed well within MacMurray mode as the conversation swirled about me. They discussed buck poles, mud bogging, and bed races, whatever those were. They mentioned Snigniss, which seemed to be a town, and Nuck Muck, which I believe was a school. The couple beside Raeanne said they were leaving for "up north" the next day. I just barely caught myself before telling them that they were *already* up north.

By the time dinner was done, Shay was so drunk I could have bitten her hand and she wouldn't have felt it. Her voice, shrill and high-pitched, was audible all over the room, offset by Chick's hammer-hard laugh. She about knocked him down with hugs and kisses every time somebody did the obligatory cling-cling-cling of spoons on glasses. While cutting the cake she dropped the first piece and, with the second, clean missed Chick's mouth. During their bridal dance, under the single spotlight, it was clear to me he was as much holding her up as dancing with her. Somehow she got through the garter toss, bouquet toss, and dollar dance. Chick shot me a couple of glances, I noticed, looking determinedly triumphant.

Raeanne and I slow-danced. Back at the table, the topic turned to my alleged "city eyes." In defense, I pointed out that I *had* clearly spotted a herd of turkeys during our drive up to the country club. Rae-

anne felt compelled to inform me that it was a flock, not a herd, and it was blocking the road at the time. The goodnatured laughter was interrupted by a piercing shriek of electronic feedback and then Shay's amplified voice: "This thing working? Hello?"

"Oh Lord," Raeanne murmured, but shifted in her chair to watch as the room noise dimmed. Shay stood by the bandstand, cordless mike in hand. She seemed unsteady, as if wearing skates for the first time, and bleary-eyed. Her white wedding outfit was looking a tad rumpled. Her bright red hair, previously so meticulously done up, now looked done in. She gave a rambling blurry lecture of thanks, interrupted every so often by polite applause. At first I was only half listening, but presently she got my full attention.

"... my cousin Rae. From Detroit." Shay held the mike close to her lips, blinking and staring, as if trying to spot Raeanne through the bright lights in her face. "I just *know* you'll have all this some day, y'know, Rae? Just don't be mad at me 'cause I didn't put you in the wedding party. 'Cause I was doing you a favor. 'Cause it costs money. Not a *lot* of money, of course, but—I know how tough things are for you these days, kind of things you must have to do to get by." Now the silence was complete. I glanced at Raeanne; she was blank-faced.

Shay rambled, "Too bad about the movie—that's got to've been so humiliating. To be cut completely out of it, oh my God. We watched the DVD last night and I could see why. Just don't worry, you'll make it some

day, you will make it, you're cute enough."

A kind of mass exhalation rose faintly from the crowd. I thought that Shay would stop then, but she charged right on. "I just wish you weren't so jealous—but did you have to—have to try to *spoil* things for . . . Was it because you blew it your first time out, with that loser? Not a hard act to follow! So what do you do? You fall into bed with some disgusting mutt from Detroit somewhere! What the *hell* is up with that, Rae? I just don't . . ."

I was aware of an embarrassed stirring and shuffling that rippled among the watchers. In my vision Shay's father appeared and took the microphone from her and escorted her back to the head table. My ears heard the band strike up some kind of Dixieland. But my mind, my thoughts, had gone utterly blank. I did see Chick, sitting with his wife—he looked out at me, pointed at me once, and winked. My chest seemed frozen, my lungs incapable of getting enough air. Consciously I uncoiled my hands, one finger at a time. It's not about you. *Not about you.*

Then Raeanne was on her feet and faced the crowd in profile to me, stock-still. She wore but a simple navy chemise. She had no spotlight and no microphone. She did not tap her glass, raise a hand, make a sound. Yet almost at once she became the focal point of the room. The voices dimmed and trailed away. The band quit abruptly. I had seen her on stage, on screen, and before groups large and small. But I had never seen her project such

star power, so effortlessly take over a room like that. As the last sounds faded, she folded her hands at her abdomen and spoke.

"I'd like to thank Uncle Ray and Aunt Barb for all those great summer visits. You extended to me a lot of love at a time I really needed it. I really loved being here, wanted to be part of it, fantasized about someday being one of you. Since getting here yesterday I've learned how skewed my perceptions were, how naive I've been. Well, we're all human. Bottom line is that you're still family. And I'll always love you."

Someone started to clap. Raeanne did not notice. "In my work I've learned to accept being the target of the cruel and thoughtless things people say. Goes with the job. As long as it's me on the receiving end, I can deal with it. But." She looked toward the head table, directly at Shay. "When you're landing them on the man who saved my life, who puts himself on the line for me, whom I love with all my heart—well." She smiled, eyes shining. "That will not do. Goodbye."

We walked out hand in hand, without looking back. As we came out into the darkness of the summer-warm parking lot, Raeanne said, "I'm so sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for, sweetheart."

"Yes, there is. Let me get this out." She looked at me. "From the bottom of my heart, I'm sorry I made you leave before the hokey-pokey."

"Oh well," I answered. "Ya turned yourself around."

"That's what it's all about," she sighed.



“I wonder if there was any bell ringing for Shay and Bill?” Raeanne asked as we rolled up the motel driveway to the road.

“What’s bell ringing?” I asked, looking both ways. Not much traffic on Route 13 that early in the morning.

“Tradition up here,” she said. “You go where the newlyweds are staying their wedding night and make some huge noisy racket, to wake them up. Know what they did for mine?”

“I’m afraid to hear.”

“My cousin Mike got a passkey to our motel room,” she said. “Snuck inside at three A.M. and fired up a power lawnmower. Hey,” she interrupted herself, pointing, “think we could hit the Pit ‘n’ Git? I need serious coffee.”

“Chunky coffee, coming right up,” I replied, wheeling us into the parking lot.

“Just hang the I.V. bottle on the window here,” she said drearily, “and plug me in.”

“Gotcha.” I shut off the engine and headed inside, barely noticing the orange warning sign on the door. I felt good. Sure, it was early, and sure, it was a six hour drive home, but I was glad to get shut of this place. In the end I’m a city guy, a city of Detroit guy, and that was where I needed to be.

What’s more, I thought as I fixed four large coffees—two black, two double-double—my Fred MacMurray act had gone threadbare. Best leave it to the professionals.

As I approached the checkout counter, I saw the elderly sales clerk

staring my way, goggle-eyed, hands half up. Between us stood a figure with his back to me. He was very tall. His elbows stuck out at an odd angle. He had something in his hand. And he seemed to be wearing something over his head, something soft and blue. A stocking mask.

“Chick?” I said.

“Hand it *over!*” he said to the clerk. I realized he was repeating himself, that he’d said that just an instant before but it hadn’t registered. “Now. Gimme the money *now.*”

I hesitated, then stepped closer, keeping space between us. The thing in his hand, I now saw, was a chrome revolver, a .32 or .38. My mouth went dry. The cardboard tray of coffee felt enormous in my hands.

“Chick, for Chrissake, what’re you doing, man?”

He glanced at me. Through the ski mask holes his eyes looked wild. “It’s not me!”

“You done gone funny-turned, boy,” I said, watching the snout of the pistol, which remained pointed in a more or less safe direction. “Put the *gun* down and—”

“Get back,” he shouted, and the gun veered toward me, “or I’ll blow you away, too! I’ll whack the lot of ya!”

The gun seemed real enough, but oddly, I was not scared. Even armed, Chick was not scary, only pathetic. “Whaddaya you want to do something like this for?” I asked gently.

“I need the money!” he yelled. “You shut down my game, I need the scratch for Vegas—Vegas takes serious moolah, I can’t take Shay out there without—”

"So you were working her brother," I interrupted, hoping to distract him, buy some time. Setting the coffee tray on the checkout counter, I faced him. "What a nice family thing to do. What was it," I asked, guessing wildly among various cons that might appeal to Chick, "a fight store?" That was an illegal—and staged—fistfight; the sucker always lost the money he bet.

"Something like that. An' it would have worked fine, nice an' easy, if you hadn't butted your big fat nose in it."

"Put the gun down, Chick," I said quietly. "It's over."

"No!" He veered the weapon back toward the clerk, who stood as he'd been, hands half up. "Pop the drawer and fork it over. *Now.*"

"Chick," I said as gently as I could, "in case you haven't figured it out yet, you're *made.*"

"That's right," came another voice. Glancing to my left, I saw Hammer Lane by an open door next to the restrooms. On the wall to his right was a big mirror, which I realized was a one-way security window. The shotgun, a Remington pump, looked like a toy in his big hands but was anything but. It was 16-gauge at least, maybe even 12, and loaded, no doubt, with buckshot.

Now I was scared.

"Who're you?" Chick asked, annoyed.

"Put it down," Hammer answered conversationally.

I knew what was next. I could get in between and complicate things. Or I could play smart and step back. I played smart.

Even through the ski mask I

could see Chick's leer. "Go ahead and shoot, bitch!" he yelled, wagging his pistol.

"Please!" I said.

Without a word, or any sort of movement, and almost casually, Hammer fired. The boom walloped my eardrums as the load of lead caught Chick's upper body. The impact sent him rocking backward in a clumsy knock-kneed dance, into a wire rack loaded with huge colorful bags of fat-free chips. Arms flailing, he took it all down with him, a long long fall, the handgun bouncing away, chip bags popping and flying. I scrambled over and crouched over him, swatting bags away, and nearly got nailed by a spurt of arterial blood shooting from Chick's ripped neck. His breathing was hard and wet, and he was convulsing the very life out of him. Taking his hand, I felt him shudder once, twice, and a third time. Then he was still.

Presently I realized that Hammer Lane was standing behind me, weapon shouldered, looking down at us, his expression dark and thoughtful. I got clumsily to my feet and said, without looking at Hammer, "He just got married yesterday, man." Then I went to the door and caught Raeanne as she came flying through it.

**I**t was four hours before the cops let us go. By then Raeanne was wrung out, so drained and listless that I thought I'd have to fasten her seat belt for her. As I backed out of the parking space, she stirred and straightened.

"Well," she said, "we tried to help. She ignored us. So now, this."

"Yep."

"Is this what always happens?" she asked me. "When you try to help people? Is this how it always comes out?"

"Sometimes," I answered. "Especially when they don't ask for the help in the first place. And sometimes even when they do."

"Oh God," she murmured. Leaning over, she buried her face in my shoulder. I wheeled us out onto U.S. 13, geared up to high, then put my arm around her. "You know what," she said, voice muffled, "we need to go up there."

"Where?"

"Shay's mom's house. I know, I know," she said, as if to override me. "She said all those mean things—but she couldn't help it. She's silly, and she's sick. Desperate for money, desperate to be married, desper-

ate to look good in front of her family."

"Uh-huh."

"But I have to go sit with her now," Raeanne said. "I'm a Brennan, and it's what Brennans do. We take care of family. . . . So turn around, please?"

"No need. We're headed that way already."

"We are?" She straightened, looked around quickly through red eyes. "Hey, we are!" she drawled. "How—"

"Turned that way to begin with, coming out of the parking lot."

She looked at me, cleared her throat. "You knew?"

"When you love someone," I said, "you pay attention."

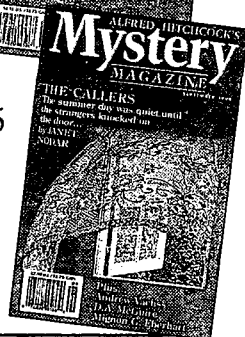
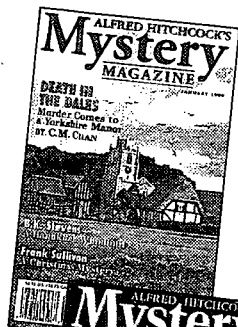
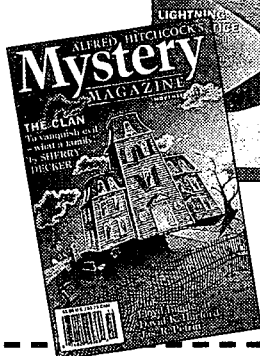
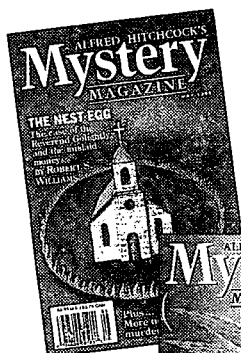
Letting out a sigh, she took my hand. And held it very tightly as we roared north.

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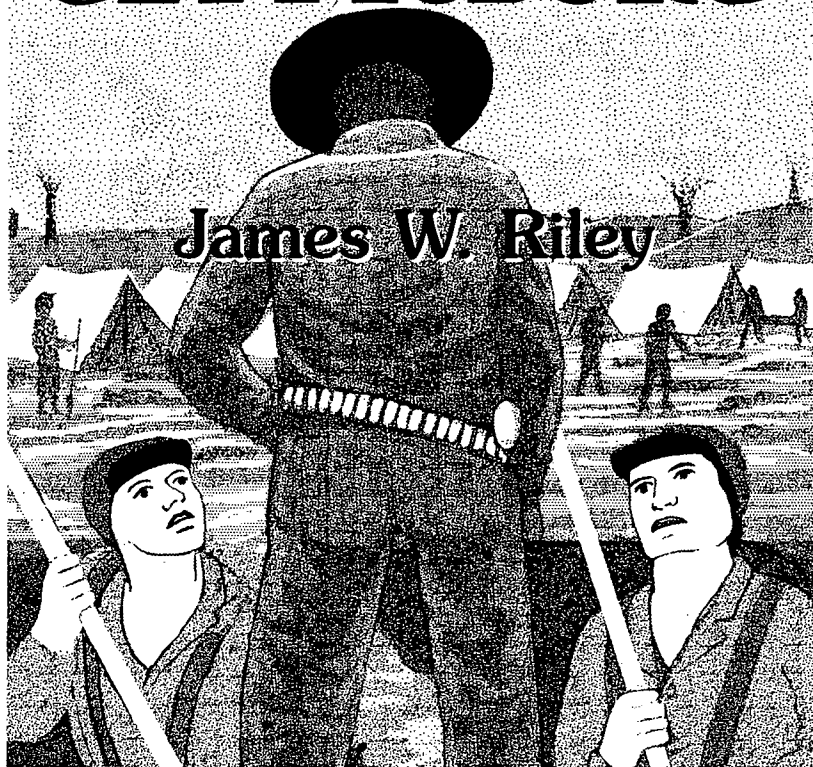
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# BURIED AT GETTYSBURG


James W. Riley



**I**n those days Toms Ferry wasn't nothing but a baby town with old Tom himself alive and kicking. He'd got the ferry going across the Ohio when you'd have to travel all the way up to Louieville before you'd find another ferry crossing between Indiana and Kentucky. And it was Tom with his older boys, Jeff and Hank, who got a saw- and grist-mill going. So some folks called us Toms Mills, and some folks called us Toms Ferry. You could of taken your pick in those days. Me, I liked Toms Ferry. Which was what stuck to us after all was said and done.

We was big enough back then, though. Tom called a meeting for nominations for town offices, and we had ourselves a little election. I was elected sheriff of Toms Ferry in September of 1861. You see, everyone was scared silly the Confederates might just cross over the river from Ken-





tucky. Everyone figured we had some lawman, he'd hold off the Confederates. I never did come to that way of thinking myself, but I was pleased to serve the town. Tom hisself was elected mayor.

My name is Hubert Wesley. I'm not kith nor kin to John Wesley. But like him, I hold to the Methodist way of looking at religion.

It took everyone near to a year to figure out that sixty-year-old Hubert Wesley, thin-haired and all, wasn't up to stopping the Confederate Army. Came a week in July of '62 when lots of Kentucky farmers crossed the ferry with covered wagons and buckboards chuck full of goods, leading cows behind them. The farmers was crazy afraid of Graycoat raiders. They would stop overnight and the next morning load up again and trek farther north, as if being too close to the Ohio River it might rise up and wash them back into Kentucky.

And later that summer, on a Saturday, the Confederates came themselves. I was over at the mill when Hank came running up from the ferry. He had a fellow just crossed who saw the Confederate Army coming right behind him.

Morgan, he said.

Word went around Toms Ferry like a brushfire, and I reckon about a hundred folk gathered down by the ferry looking across at the other side. And they wasn't disappointed. Gray cavalry kept coming and coming until it stretched over a mile, moving along the river road going the direction of Louieville. We could see some poor folk waiting for the ferry. They lost all the horses, wagons, and cows they'd thought to bring safe over to Indiana. And the Confederate cavalry set fire to Tom's ferry pier, too. Wasn't nobody went over to try to put it out. Long after those Graycoats was gone, we stood around watching that smoke going up in a black column from the burning pier. Those creosote-soaked railroad ties Tom had used burned real good.

We wasn't feeling so safe ourselves, but the Confederates kept riding on up the road and hadn't paid us any attention across the river. Some of the men thought as to bring down shotguns and such, but they stood there hangdog-faced, the guns drooping down. Useless.

You can bet your bottom dollar the talk of the sheriff arresting the Confederate Army stopped. And every danged one of us was scared silly of those Graycoats coming through on our side of the river. On Sunday the meetinghouse was packed to the gills with nearly everybody from twenty miles even. And old Daddy Gilmore preached a sermon about "Are You Ready to Meet the Devil's Army." And twenty new Methodists joined up on the spot they were so moved.

But we didn't see any more of gray that year. Fact is, the war came around to our back door instead of the front. And I'm not referring to Tom's youngest boy, Billy, getting shot dead at Fredericksburg. Tom figured he was lucky Jeff and Hank were too old to join. But he took Billy getting killed pretty dang hard.

It was almost a year later after we had seen the Confederates, come June of '63, two things happened on account of the war. Abe Lincoln came to town. And little Annie Davis was killed—murdered.

Of course I don't mean the president. Abe Lincoln was a slave black man who broke free on his own. He swam across the Ohio River one night. Tom sent Jeff over to fetch me because Abe was begging for something to eat at the mill. Nobody in Toms Ferry ever knew what Abe's name was. Just Jeff says to me there's a man over at the mill Abe Lincoln sent, and we called him Abe Lincoln after that. Wasn't none of us could make out a word Abe said. He was always mumbling and stuttering so hard. "Louiseana" was the only thing he ever said made any sense to anybody. We figured that's where he'd come from. But Abe was good at acting out what he needed. He could get all the men laughing at how he could make-believe a hog to get a rash of bacon for himself.


When I got over to the mill, Abe was out in back. He'd picked up an axe, and he was making firewood faster than a tornado in a forest. Tom came out from the mill. Him, me, and Jeff stood watching Abe make the firewood fly. "Looks like you got yourself a mighty good worker right there," I said to old Tom. "Looks like you're right 'bout that," he says back. So Abe went to work for Tom at the mill. I'd say he was about the best worker Tom ever had in that mill. Smart, too. It wasn't but a couple weeks he was making timber into lumber like he'd been working there his whole life. Tom had an old shed on the river about a quarter mile upstream from the ferry where he'd had his first ferry landing, and he let Abe bed down in that shed.

Abe came to Toms Ferry at the start of June. It wasn't four more weeks until Annie Davis was killed.

First off, Annie disappeared. Now, I grant you I was real soft on her mother, Ida Davis. Ida had lost her old man to influenza the same winter it took my Lisa. So I'd have done anything I could for Ida.

But four boys from the 14th Indiana Volunteers was home on furlough. They'd been strutting around in their blue uniforms and slouch hats. I'd figured Annie had run off with one of them. Youngsters go crazy during a war and attempt to live their whole lives in a few days. Annie being young and pretty and maybe taking a fancy to one of those soldier boys, well, anything could have happened. And understand Annie was probably near as tough as any old soldier boy. She used to whip all those boys when they were youngsters. And she always had a mind of her own such as to put to shame everyone who tried to argue against her point of view. Why, she was pretty, right smart, and always so happy, too. Any fellow in his right mind would have wanted Annie for his gal.

So when the Widow Davis came calling, crying because Annie'd disappeared, I told her we'd have to wait a day or two see if she'd come back. Because the day she disappeared was the same day those four boys went back to war.



Three days later I was working out by the barn fixing up some fencing Jeb had knocked down. Jeb's my brown gelding for the buckboard and occasional riding. I saw Hank running up the hill toward my barn, and I said to myself, here it comes. Trouble.

"It's Annie Davis," Hank was shouting even before he stopped his running, his face red and puffed up. "She's been kilt by that colored feller!"

"Hang on," I said, "catch up with yourself." But I didn't like the sound of it. "If Annie's dead, there ain't none of us but the Lord's goin' to help her now. So take your time and give it to me straight out. You saying Abe Lincoln kilt her?"

Hank stood there huffing and heaving until he could stand up without leaning on something. "That's what I'm sayin'. We got him over at the mill for ya."

"What happened?"

"Mother Donnelly's winter hog broke loose. She took off after it, but that hog had a jump on her. Last anybody saw, it was headed upstream on the river road. Mrs. Donnelly follered it up there. She wasn't but a shout away from Tom's shed where Abe's beddin' down when she hears her old hog rootin' and snortin' a few feet off the road. Back in there she finds the hog worryin' at something looks like a pile of rags. Good Lord, if it ain't Annie's poor dead body havin' been eaten and pecked away at by all kinds a critters."

I put my hand up. "Slow down, Hank. You're going to kill yourself with this."

"Mrs. Donnelly got that hog on a leash and brung it home. She come straight to the mill. I went on down with Jeff while Tom borrowed a farmer's wagon and team and follered us. We wrapped poor Annie in a quilt she were alyin' on and took her on over to the Widder Davis to get laid out. That poor woman's 'bout to lose her mind."

"Where'd Abe get a quilt to lay out Annie? He hain't got quilts."

Hank looked befuddled. "I can't tell you that, Hubert. She's on a quilt, that's all I know."

----- "He kilt her with the axe?"

Hank face began to get red again. "I do not know what kilt her. But I know somebody done something to Annie. I knows it as I'm standin' here." He held his arms out in front of him. "I jest finished carryin' her poor body in my own hands."

"And it was Abe?"

"Well, she's found practicly next door to where he's been livin'. That's got to tell you something, hain't it?"

I frowned at Hank.

He looked sideways at the ground. "'Sides, who else in this town going do something like that?"

For the first time since I'd been elected, I got down the big Colt .45 revolver the town had bought for me and strapped it on, holster, belt, and

all. I threw a saddle on Jeb and walked back to the mill with Hank leading Jeb behind me.

Abe was sitting on the floor in a corner of the mill wearing the same red flannel shirt and canvas britches he always did. Somebody had tied a rope around his ankle and run it loose-like over a beam. Guess they reckoned they could just pull him up and dangle him by his leg if they had to. He was lucky it wasn't round his neck. The other men were doing some work, but they were slow as turtles. A shotgun was leaning against the wall. I walked up to Abe.

"You kill Annie Davis, Abe?"

Abe sputtered and stuttered and, like usual, I couldn't make out a word he was saying. But he shook his head back and forth so violently I got a pretty good idea he was denying it. I left him there and rode Jeb on over to pay my respects to Ida Davis.

She came out from the room where she and the other womenfolk were cleaning Annie up and fixing her for burial. I consoled her best I could. After I got her through a crying spell, I asked to speak to Mother Donnelly. "You seen anything looks like somebody done something to Annie?" I asked Mother Donnelly. "She shot or cut or you seen any marks on her neck like she's strangled?"

"No, Hubert, she don't have no marks, no cuts except what some critters and my ruttin' hog done to her."

"And was her clothes disarrayed or something?"

Mrs. Donnelly looked at the ground. "I'd ruther not be talkin' 'bout that part of it."


"I'm the one to tell," I says to her. "I never did get a badge, but I'm the law in Toms Ferry. What did you see out there?"

Mrs. Donnelly shuffled back and forth between her two feet. "She wasn't wearin' all her clothes. She was laid out on Ida's picnic quilt with jest her petticoat on her. The rest of her clothes was all throwed on top of her like to cover her up. I put that blue dress back on the girl to make her decent 'fore the menfolk showed up."

I thanked Mother Donnelly for her confidences. She directed me as to how to find the spot where she'd found poor Annie. I rode Jeb out. It weren't hard to find. Some medicine man coming through had set up camp there the year before. He left a campfire place and some logs to sit on. I found the spot where Annie's body had laid on the quilt for three days. The grass was flat and turning brown.

I walked around the camp, looking for nothing but keeping my eyes peeled. I spotted something shiny under one of the log seats the medicine man had left behind. When I pulled it out, I found myself looking eye to eye at a bottle of Old Tennessee Jack brand corn mash whisky half full.

What's unusual 'bout Old Tennessee Jack is we haven't seen none of it since the war broke out. It's made down in Lynchburg, Tennessee, and that's not in the Union.



I screwed off the cap and damned if I didn't know right then what killed Annie. It didn't smell like any Old Tennessee Jack I'd ever heard of. It smelt like the rat poison I used out in the corncrib, a bitter nut smell. Mind you, being a Methodist, I don't officially hold with drink, although there's many a time I've had a lick or two with the boys. So I can tell you when a bottle of liquor is chuck full of cyanide.

I got hold of Tom as mayor, and we went on over to old Daddy Gilmore's house, figuring him, as preacher, should be in on this, too. They were both shocked to see me carry in half a bottle of Old Tennessee Jack and set it right there on the table. Tom wouldn't mind taking a lick once or twice a day to "clear the throat," but even he knew Daddy Gilmore would shoot you dead before he'd have liquor in his house.

"This here's what kilt Annie," I told them. "It's chuck full of cyanide. Just take a whiff."

I unscrewed the cap, and while Tom couldn't smell anything and never would after living with all that flour and wood dust most of his life, Daddy Gilmore let on as how it smelt like poison to him all right. Not as if he didn't think liquor was poison enough.

"Where the hell would a bottle of Old Tennessee come from?" Tom says. And Daddy Gilmore gave him a dirty look for sayin' "hell."

"Some folks might claim Abe brought it 'cross the river with him," I said. "But I can't see why a man would swim all that distance carrying a bottle of poison."

"Maybe we should talk to Abe before other folks let this get outa hand," Daddy Gilmore said.

Of course, talking to Abe is easier said than done. Tom went over to the mill and came back with both Hank and Jeff. Hank was leading Abe tied up, hands behind him and a rope around his neck. Jeff followed with the shotgun.

"Come on in, Abe," I said. I untied the ropes and led him into Daddy Gilmore's parsonage. He refused to sit, standing looking down at the floor like I guess he'd learnt as a slave. Jeff and Hank stood at the door behind him, Jeff still holding the shotgun.

"Abe, you understand that Annie Davis been kilt?"

Abe nodded his head, not looking us in the eye.

"You poison that girl?" Tom asked him. "You kilt her?"

Abe still didn't look up. He shook his head vigorously back and forth. He tried to tell us something, but as usual, he stuttered and spewed out nonsense until Jeff, suddenlike, hit him in the back with the stock of the shotgun. Abe fell on his knees and shut up, looking down at the floor like a man praying.

"It ain't necessary to resort to violence," Daddy Gilmore said. "Abe's a free man now even if he can't talk."

"I think he's jest aplayin' with us, preacher. He coulda talked if he wanted to."



"I don't think you're right about that," I said to Jeff. "Would you take that there shotgun and you and Hank wait outside."

Jeff and Hank moved on outside. I could see the relief in Abe's eyes. He stood again but still looking down. I pointed to the bottle. "Abe, you ever see this Old Tennessee Jack before?"

Abe looked down at the bottle on the table. He hesitated, and his eyes shifted from the bottle to me. He looked down at the floor and said nothing.

Tom came out and said what we were all thinking. "He knowed something about that Ol' Tennessee Jack!"

"Come on, Abe," I said, "we got to know what you know. Somehow you got to tell us."

Abe looked us eye to eye. He started to try to talk some but stopped because he knew we couldn't understand. He did one of his pantomime acts. We could see a marching soldier boy. The soldier had his arm around a woman. Abe scooped up the Old Tennessee Jack, and we could see him walking along, a soldier boy, his arm round his girl, carrying the Old Tennessee Jack at his side.

"Well, I'll be damned," Tom said. Daddy Gilmore shot him a dirty look, but Tom didn't pay him any mind. I didn't either.

"Was one of them soldier boys done it," I said.

Both Tom and Daddy Gilmore nodded their heads.


"And Abe's the only soul round seen them together."

"And we know who done it," old Tom said. "That's to say we don't exactly know who done it, but we know it was either Isaiah Wheaton, Jacob Donnelly, Jonathan Roundtree, or Abraham Ewing. Them's the soldier boys was back on furlough."

Well, we asked Abe to wait out on the porch. And we sat a spell together just talking about the weather or any other old thing we could think up to avoid ourselves having to talk about the one thing we had to talk about. It wasn't pretty when we knew all those young fellows, but we still couldn't tell who was the one that did such a horrible crime in his own town.

There was the other problem, too. All four of those youngsters had joined up the 14th Indiana Volunteers to go and fight against the Confederates. So it wasn't like we could just line them up and whap them upside their heads. They were gone to serve the Union. Or leastwise three of them had. The other went to get away from us so he wouldn't have to look us in the face after he'd killed Annie.

The preacher and the mayor agreed I would hang onto Abe and take a look around. I took Abe back down to my place and set him up in the woodshed with a waxed canvas for a groundcloth. I told him to just hang on, cut some wood for me if he had to do something. I rode Jeb all over town during the afternoon and down the road toward the medicine man's camp.



Farmer Nesbitt reckoned as he'd hollered a hello to Mother Donnelly's kid Jacob out along the road to the camp. Hank reminded himself he'd seen Annie walking and talking real serious with Isaiah Wheaton the day she disappeared. Ida Davis herself gave me a letter she'd found Annie'd got from Jonathan Roundtree. He'd wrote her asking to come courtin' during his furlough. Just as I was getting on Jeb to ride over home, Mother Donnelly cornered me. She passed me a strip of colored yarn she said was found among Annie's clothes. Looked to her like it might of come off a sweater Abraham Ewing's grandma knitted him last Christmas. Other folks told other tales, and nothing led back to one boy or another.

Instead of turning home, I found myself back at the parsonage with Daddy Gilmore and old Tom. "What the hell we goin' to do?" Tom said.

"I'd much 'bliged you didn't curse in the parsonage," Daddy Gilmore said. "This house is the Lord's house. And I heerd 'nough cursin' and saw 'nough violence and poisoned liquor in here today to last me a long spell."

Tom nodded as he'd try.

"I think the best thing is I catch up with those fellers," I said. "They haven't gone but three days. We know they had to report over to Baltimore to get back to the 14th Volunteers."

"I reckon that's right," Tom said.

"And since the only one can identify the boy holding the Old Tennessee Jack is Abe, I'm proposing to take Abe with me."

Well, we jawed about that for a bit, but there wasn't anything wrong with my reasoning. Abe and I would catch the four o'clock packet paddlewheel upstream on the morrow after Annie's burial.

Annie's funeral was midmorning the next day. Ida Davis played her fiddle, and it reminded us of Annie and how she used to fiddle up a storm. Annie played Mozart and Bach so sweet and pure it would lift your soul right up. And she could rustle up some right nice Kentucky tunes, too. She'd play "The Forked Deer" or "Old Fat Gal," and you just could not stop your feet from jumping with the music. Remembering those square dances brought tears to my eyes looking on her closed pine box.

After poor Annie was buried, I took Jeb on over home and collected Abe. I told him I needed him to go along with me so he could tell me which boy he saw with the Old Tennessee Jack. He understood. And I know he figured he didn't want to sit round Toms Ferry with everyone blaming him for poor Annie. I packed up my knapsack with cornmeal and dried beef. I put my Colt .45 revolver in there, too, with twelve loads. After I closed it up, I tied a coupla wool blankets and waxed canvas groundcloths on top. We walked off back down to the ferry, Abe carrying the goods on his back.

We caught the packet paddlewheel upstream that passes us every other day near four o'clock. At Louieville we switched over to the railroad, which we intended to ride all the way east to Baltimore.

Except we found ourselves getting off over in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We couldn't go any farther because the Confederates had cut the railroad tracks up at the next town, York. Our boys had slipped through, but we hadn't. We met a Union officer from Illinois caught there himself. He said that General Meade was moving the Union Army up from Maryland to catch Lee and his Rebs in Pennsylvania. We'd find our Indiana boys if we headed south toward Gettysburg instead of going all the way around Baltimore. The Confederate Army was roaming around Pennsylvania, requisitioning every cow, horse, wagon, and Negro they came across. They'd be pointed right at Harrisburg, all right. But he thought there wouldn't be any Gray boys left by the time Abe and I found the Union Army. On the other hand, close as the Union boys were, the Confederates were between us and them.

I don't give up easy. I found us a buckboard and a one-eyed nag so old nobody cared if we lost her. Abe and I headed south.

Confederate cavalry stopped us once. Abe hid out when we spotted them coming. They took one look at my old mare and thought her so useless as to be more harm to the Union alive than dead. And I was too old a man to be a soldier.

We hid out from other Rebel patrols until nightfall. Early the next morning we could hear the sounds of artillery ahead of us. Abe and I hid out again in an abandoned farmhouse right through the night.

A different noise woke us up the next morning before dawn. There was a wagon column of indeterminate length passing on the road out the lane. In the dark we couldn't tell who they might be. But we could hear the teamsters hee-hawing the horses. And it didn't ever seem to end. A rain had come up, and Abe and I were sheltering under the buckboard.

At last the light came up, and the first thing we saw were men in gray uniforms marching past. Scared the living daylights out of the both of us. Then we saw they weren't carrying guns. And soldiers in Union Blue carrying rifles guarded and pushed them right along. Another long line of wagons came behind this bunch. We could see they were full of wounded Union men. I reckoned whatever it was happened was over now. Abe helped me hitch up Nellie.


When we came out to the road, we saw wagons coming toward us as far along as the next ridge.

"Hey, is the fightin' over?" I shouted to one of the teamsters.

"I lived to tell you it is," he shouted back. "We done whipped those Confederates so bad they don't know whether they is a comin' or agoin'." A cheer went up from the wounded men.

Although we had to pull off many times to let the wagons pass, Abe and I made our way down the road toward the Union Army. Nellie didn't like the rain much, but she did what she was told for the most of it.

When we entered Gettysburg, I could see more wounded men all around the streets and in all the houses. Looked pretty much like every-



body in the whole army got wounded. Union Headquarters directed us to the 14th Volunteers. They were over on burial duty.

Well, we pushed through all the wagons and fuss on over to the fields where the burying was going on. When I saw that place, I figured I was wrong about everybody getting wounded. There were dead men laid out as far as my eye could see. So half the men were wounded, and the other half were dead.

Abe kept shaking his head in disbelief. I prayed to myself I would never see the likes of this again. But I kept on. Find those boys and get this Annie murder settled.

I found the 14th. They were digging holes as fast as they could and planting a dead Confederate boy like a seed in each one. There wasn't any crop going to come up from this seed, though.

I left Abe holding Nellie at the edge of burial ground and walked on over to where I could see two of our four boys working together.

"How you do, boys," I said as I came up. It was Isaiah Wheaton and Jacob Donnelly each down in a grave digging away. I never had seen men's eyes like to these boys'. I reckoned if they'd had to endure one more terrible thing they'd have dropped down dead in those graves themselves, that's how far gone they were. And I also reckon I was the sight nearly did that to them, too. Me, Sheriff Hubert Wesley from Toms Ferry. I had to step over two Confederate dead boys to approach them. One of the dead looked asleep so peaceful-like; the other hadn't much face left and a whole leg was just missing altogether.

The boys came alive and exchanged a look, and their eyes went off dead again. "Where's Jonathan and Abraham?" I asked. They kept digging as though they hadn't heard me. I waited, patient. None of us was rushing off. After quite a spell Jacob spoke up.

"Jonathan's dead. A Reb ran him through with his bayonet yesterday." He kept at his digging, throwing the loose clods carefully away from me.

Isaiah broke in, "And we hain't seen Abraham since a cannon took his hand right off. We're prayin' he's in the hospital. But we hain't had time to check up on him." He kept digging, too.

"You boys know why I'm here?"

Jacob got up out of the grave he was digging and came to stand beside me. He looked off across the awful field of corpses, but I could tell he couldn't see them now.

"Yep, Sheriff Wesley, we knowed we'd hear about it sometime."

Jacob surprised me. I figured one of them had done it and all four would deny it up and down and round the town. One of them would have been a liar.

"You know, son, somebody killed poor Annie Davis the day you fellers left town. You can tell me a story about that?"

It was a hard thing, talking to these boys. They were there and then they were gone.

“We kinda all done it,” Jacob said after a spell.

Well, you could of knocked me down with a feather and buried me right there alongside all those dead Confederate fellows. They all did it? I knew those boys, and I wouldn't have said a single one of them was bad. Maybe miss on one, but the whole bunch?

“You better clear up what you're saying here. All of you done it?”

“I got to start back at Fredericksburg to tell you the story, sheriff. Member how Tom's son Billy got hisself kilt at Fredericksburg?”

“Sure I do,” I say, nodding for him to get on with it.

“After Billy got kilt, the four of us was sittin' round sayin' how we might up and get kilt, too. And Isaiah says as to how he's goin' to court Annie Davis as soon as he gets hisself back to Toms Ferry. Now, that jest didn't sit right with me or Jonathan or Abraham 'cause we all had thoughts and such about courtin' Annie.

“So the four of us made a sacred vow 'mongst us. When we got ourselves back home, each of us would ask Annie iffen he could come courtin', and then let her be the one to choose.”

“I'm listenin',” I told him.

Tears were glistening on Jacob's face now. Amongst some thousands of dead men he couldn't even see, he could cry for Annie.

“Which such of us Annie chose, the others of us would support that man to be successful in his courtin'.”

Jacob held up there. I looked down at Isaiah still slowly shoveling dirt from the grave. Isaiah too had tears streaming down his face.

“Ever'thing woulda been okay, too, iffen Jonathan hain't acome 'cross that bottle of Old Tennessee Jack whisky. It was after Chancellorsville. We pushed the Rebs back on our side. Overran their camp right smart. Why, they pulled out in such a hurry seemed like they'd left ever'thing behind. Jonathan picked up the Old Tennessee. We was movin' so fast he jest threw it into his knapsack. We didn't know they'd pulled back on purpose. Collapsed the boys on our right hand, but we pulled back right smart.


“Sheriff Wesley, you knowed us'n boys nary touch a drop of liquor. So's we didn't ever open that there Old Tennessee.” Jacob sighed and shuffled his feet. Up the hill a bunch of Confederates were being planted. I waited, patient.

“When we come up to Toms Ferry on furlough, well, each of us went to Annie and asked her such of us she'd like to see come courtin'. And she did pick one of us, yes she did.”

The boys' sergeant came along, and he made the boys go back to their digging. He didn't say anything to me. Jacob carried on with the story from his grave.

“Well, Annie saw each one of us once 'fore she made up her mind. When she did, that feller . . .”

“Who'd she pick?”



This time it was Isaiah who stopped digging and leaned on his shovel. "We ain't ready to tell you, sheriff. Let Jacob tell it like we want him to."

I kept my peace. Jacob went on digging a grave and talking.

"The feller she picked went down the road a ways with her. They'd packed up a picnic lunch of strawberries, cornbread, and chicken. And a bottle lemonade. The feller was courtin' her also took 'long the Old Tennessee whisky. Wasn't like he even athought they'd be drinkin' it. Seemed the soldier thing to do.

"Well, what with leaving for the war on the packet that same day and Billy gettin' hisself kilt, sheriff, we jest didn't think we was goin' to live till the next time. One thing led to another. He proposed. She 'cepted. Pretty soon they was makin' love like the sweetest man and wife you'd of ever want to hear 'bout."

Both Jacob and Isaiah were standing still now, leaning on those shovels.

"Neither o' them had so much as touched the Old Tennessee. But Annie, I guess she wanted to show she was as tough as any ol' soldier boy. She grabbed the bottle, opened it up, and took a damn long swig. She coughed and spit some of it out, then swigged again. Her feller took the bottle from her and was about to swig it himself when he got a good smell of it. It didn't smell right to him.

"Just then Annie started feeling real sick."

Jacob stopped and looked up at me.

"Sheriff, there wasn't nothing to do 'cept watch her die. It were near as quick as the bayonet kilt Jonathan yesterday." Both boys were squinting up at me where I stood above them in their graves. "We didn't know 'bout the poison the Johnny Rebs left in that bottle Old Tennessee. Some Reb wanted to kill hard-fightin' Union soldiers. He kilt Annie 'stead."

We all stood there like we were having a moment of silence. And I guess we were. Jacob spoke again.

"The man kilt Annie is probable out here somewhere, Sheriff Wesley. It ain't us'n." Jacob pointed to the thousands of corpses laid out in the rain waiting to be put to earth. "It ain't us'n."

I looked again at those Confederate dead, and I came to my mind.

"I reckon I'll see you boys in Toms Ferry," I said to them. And I walked off to where Abe was waiting with the buckboard and Nellie.

I left the boys there digging the grave for the man who killed Annie.



FICTION

# LOOKING FOR GARBO IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

DeLoris Stanton Forbes



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/00

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**I**t ushered in the island's social season, it portended to be the Party of the Year, the Year being the one when Jeannette Rockefeller, widow of Arkansas governor Winthrop Rockefeller, gave the really big soirée. She invited just about everyone on the island. Well, not *everyone*, of course, but all the Americans (including Tori-come-lately me) and everyone else who counted. I don't mean to suggest that Jeannette was a snob, but one has to draw the line someplace. That's what Eliza Donner said, and Eliza should know—she knew everything about the island. She was the first American to make St. Martin her home.

We all (when I say “we,” I mean the Americans) thought the reason Jeannette was hosting such a big party was the extraordinary number of celebrities who'd recently descended on the island (as guests of the celebrities who had houses here) including, of all people, Greta Garbo. We all said great, we all said we'd give a party for Greta Garbo if we could (if we had had the right house, had the right introduction to the reclusive lady, had enough money/know-how/chutzpah/parking area, etc.), and since Jeannette seemed to have all these assets, we all said great and R.S.V.P.'d our supposedly blasé heads off.

Jake Greer and I went together. Jake (being gay) seemed an ideal date for me inasmuch as I was recuperating from a recent, unpleasant divorce, there weren't that many unattached and eligible males on the island, and he asked me to go with him. So I said sure because I

liked Jake and I didn't intend to romance anybody at all. But accepting the invitation turned out to be a potential mistake, as Jake had unexpected visitors—his brother Kevin and wife Doreen and their fifteen-year-old daughter Heather. When he picked me up in his big Rolls (the only one on the island; Jake had had it shipped in), we set off not as a twosome but as a socially awkward quintet with Jake muttering in my ear, “Sorry, Tori.” I patted his driving hand, meaning problem understood. Who wouldn't want to see Greta Garbo? And Benny Goodman and Beverly Sills and Dustin Hoffman and Harry Belafonte and—rumor had it—Jackie Onassis? The last might be so and it might not. It seemed she wandered on and off the island; further rumor had it that she was looking at land. But nobody knew for sure.

Jeannette's island estate was in the Lowlands (the majority of the American contingent owned houses in the Lowlands on the French side; others had homes in Guana Bay and Oyster Pond on the Dutch side). I was just about the only oddie. Because of my shop, I lived in the French fishing village of Grand Case, lived seaside over my shop (like a proper shopkeeper), and loved it.

Jake was a half-owner (and whole manager) of the island's radio station. His brother Kevin kept referring to the station as “the Caribbean's biggest Walkie-Talkie” and wanted to know if Jake had enough batteries to last the season. Jake laughed agreeably, Kevin's cutesy wife Doreen tittered. Heather re-

tained her bored look. I wasn't sure whether that was due to pure ennui or teenage posturing. An animated Heather would have been a beautiful young woman, but with a built-in semidemiquaver pout, she came off as merely a spoiled brat. Well, they were Jake's problem, not mine.

How long were they staying? I politely asked. "Oh, I don't know," was Kevin's answer, "maybe a week, maybe a month. It depends on what this so-called paradise has to offer. So far I'd say—a couple of days?" Nobody'd said so, but I got the impression that Jake and his brother weren't exactly buddy-buddy.

Parking at Jeannette's was already a problem by the time we arrived. Jake let us out at the entrance before he drove on, in search of the nearest available space. "He's so very thoughtful," I confided to Doreen, who gave me a look that I translated as "Are you serious?"

Kevin's response was "Yeah." He had a peculiar laugh; it sounded more like a snort than an expression of amusement. "Old Jake's thoughtful, all right. Very thoughtful. Just too-too for words. And he's hooked on quiche." Doreen's titter was a backup comment.

"Tell me, Kevin, what's your profession? Jake said something about filmmaking." It was all I could do to make pleasant conversation as we made our way up to Jeannette's elegant foyer.

"Daddy is a producer." (Aha! Heather spoke!) "An independent producer."

"Oh really? Something I've seen? We're not much on movie theaters down here, but we all have VCR's,

and we rent films like cinema junkies."

If anybody answered, I didn't hear (and didn't much care); we crossed Jeannette's postern and instantly mingled with the masses. She really *had* invited the whole island. "Hi, Essie, hi, Frank." (The Andersons; they owned a big house on Pelican Key). "Where's our gracious hostess? Oh, there she is—time to make my 'thanks for the invite' speech. Oh, there are the Kesslers." (He was a magazine publisher from New York, very with it). "Are you guys leaving? So soon?"

Marlene Kessler had the excuse ready: "We've got to go to the airport, guests arriving. What can we do?" She made a face.

"What a shame. Did you see her?"

"Garbo? Oh yes. What an amazing woman. Jeff's wagging fingers at me, see you later, Tori. Got to fly." And they were gone, leaving space for me to move up to our hostess, to say, "Jeannette, what a soirée! Thanks for asking me, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. This is Jake Greer's brother Kevin and his wife Doreen. And their daughter Heather. Visiting from—Texas." (I thought Jake had said Texas, but what a movie producer was doing in Texas escaped me.) "I guess Jake told you they were coming." (Had he? I hoped so.) "Jake's looking for a parking place; the whole world must be here."

Eliza Donner was at Jeannette's elbow. Jeannette was receiving her guests under a blooming flamboyant tree, pictorially très chic. Eliza was dressed to the nine and three-quarters this evening, all white

floaty stuff with spangles, and she looked at least ten years younger than she did when one encountered her at the Food Center buying Campbell's soup and Stouffer's frozen. Nobody could estimate Eliza's age accurately although many tried. Especially after she snagged Dix O'Shaunessy. "Can you believe it?" dissed the grapevine. "He could've had his pick and he chose Eliza? Especially over Bebe and Dulcinera!"

Yeah. Especially over Bebe and Dulcinera. The island boasted two legitimate beauties, Bebe Javert, the local girl turned international model, and Dulcinera, the real estate heiress. Both were true islanders, Bebe born in Marigot to light-skinned island French (her mother was educated in Paris, and her father was a semi-famous artist) and Dulcinera, an outside child born in Orleans to a local black beauty and Jacques Villeneuve, landowner extraordinaire. Bebe was pale blonde from head to toe, Dulcinera was ditto in elegant carved mahogany, and they were chums. Inseparable. Since childhood, I'd been told. I'd been told, too, that they both fancied the newcomer, the American entertainer Dix O'Shaunessy, he of the curly gold hair and the sparkling blue bedroom eyes. The whole island had sat back to enjoy the contest, and then Eliza Donner stepped in and spoiled it all.

Ah, always a fly in the ointment. Or, in Eliza's case, a sea urchin with prickly spines.

"Is she here?" I asked Jeannette.

"Who?" my hostess looked innocently blank, but there was an eye twinkle that gave her away.

"Oh, you know. Greta Garbo. And Jackie Onassis? Either or either. I'm salivating, Jeannette."

"I don't know, I think Garbo's in the house somewhere, sitting down. She's no chicken, you know. But she still looks like Garbo. Amazing."

"Yes," Eliza echoed. "Amazing. How are you, Tori? Dating Jake, are you? Any port in a storm, I guess—no, more like any raft in a doldrum, yes? I spotted Jake at the casino a couple of nights back. With some hunky male. A new chum?"

In the absence of the white knight I took up the lance. Eliza was famous for her thrust and parry. "It must have been his brother, Eliza," I said sweetly. "He's visiting. With his family. They're here someplace, I'll bring them over."

"Yes, well, I'm just going, so we'll make it some other time. I was telling Jeannette that Dix has a special show tonight and I simply can't miss it, it would break the poor boy's heart. He's introducing a new song, one of his own. And Jackie Onassis will be there." To Jeannette she added, "Too bad you've scheduled your soirée for the same night. You should have checked with me, darling; that way we can avoid these disappointing social conflicts. So many people who would be here otherwise are there."

"Yes, isn't it a shame? Oh, there's what's-his-name from the U.N."—Jeannette picked off her attention and put it elsewhere. "He's Beverly Sills's guest, I must go greet him if you'll excuse me," and she wandered off, leaving Eliza to all but stomp out in a camouflaged high dudgeon, too late I guessed for that

old she-dog to learn diplomacy. Come, come, Tori, I told my snide side, keep that up and you'll end up an Eliza Donner clone.

I looked around. The grounds were filled with people, and from what I could see inside the house, it was bustling there, too. "Yes," I said to Eliza, would have said to Eliza if she'd stayed around, but as she wasn't, I spoke to the nearest ears, those belonging to Phyllis Healey (a rival shop owner of sorts from Philipsburg) who was at least ten feet away. Just in case anybody thought I was talking to the wind. "Too bad nobody came. Oh, there's Benny Goodman. Since his wife died, he's been wandering around like a lost sheep looking for Bo-peep. Who's that woman he's with tonight?"

Nobody answered of course—Phyllis couldn't possibly hear me.

There I stood pondering choices with a backdrop of uncertain Texas Greers. Should I take them along inside, or should we wait for Jake, and where the heck was he, anyway? He'd saddled me with his relatives, who stood looking around like polite boors being bored. Was it my place to introduce them to our hostess; wouldn't that be rather awkward—"Hi, Jeannette, this is Jake's brother and Jake's sister-in-law and Jake's niece, but I don't know where Jake is. He went off to park the car."

And suddenly there he was, making polite room for us through a chattering clump. Instead of lighting into him, I made nice by repeating my Benny Goodman query. Jake said, "I think she's the Estée Lauder gal, PR, something like that.

Come on, we'll go over and say hi, find out."

"You go ahead. I'm going inside to look for Garbo. Just laying eyes on her is a lifelong ambition."

I edged across the patio, where a line was waiting to ravage the huge bowl of gigantic shrimp (I snagged one in passing), to slip inside the main room, a large room with enough space to swing a dozen cats (normally—I'd been there twice before) but now packed to the edges with party-minded islanders.

I greeted right and left as I slid through. There seemed to be a concentration of people in the vicinity of the conversation-conducting sofa. I could just imagine Garbo enthroned in the center surrounded by awestruck fans, a group I planned to swell as soon as soon as I got close enough.

"Who is she, anyway?" asked a voice at my elbow. "I never heard of anybody named Garbo."

That stopped my forward progress. I turned to see Heather staring blankly at me.

"You never heard of Greta Garbo?"

She shook her hair. Her hair was the major Heather attraction. It was clean (yes!), cut just below the ears, and it bounced. As well as shone. Colorwise, it was on the auburn side. A most attractive young woman if she'd just take that pout off her face. And wear something halfway attractive. Maybe I could get her into the shop. I had a darling Donna Karan knockoff one of my seamstresses had turned out . . . imagine that, she'd never heard of Garbo!

Well, of course. She was fifteen. Garbo had been a shadow in the entertainment world for over fifty years. She'd made her last film before World War II.

Probably Heather's mother and father were Garbo-limited as well. Actually, I'd never seen any of her films during her heyday—even I was too young for real Garbo-watching status.

The room was already overcrowded and growing more so. People were pushing against us, elbowing past, somebody even spilled a bit of drink on my shoulder—Ralph Dunn (car dealerships in Ohio) it was, already on his way to sloppy-drunk. I drew Heather aside, found a niche near the wall, and set out to make her barely Garbo literate. You can only do so much when you have to shout to be heard.

"She was considered the most beautiful woman in the—I guess the world. Somebody said she was a deer in the body of a woman, somebody else called her the dream princess of eternity, the knockout of the ages."

"Was she really that beautiful?" Did I see a flicker of interest in those "I dare you to amuse me" eyes?

"Yes. I think so. But she was different. When she came here from Sweden, she was so unlike the reigning stars of the silver screen—that's what they called it then, the silver screen because of the film, you see. It had a silver backing . . . sorry, don't mean to bore you. Well, the others were were all—created, I guess is the word. There were Clara Bow and Jean Harlow and their ilk, Clara Bow with the exag-

gerated cupid-bow lips and Jean Harlow with the dyed-to-the-roots platinum hair. They were, like, fake. American girls-next-door with enough cosmetic alterations to titillate the indiscriminating public. False temptresses. Garbo simply was."

"If she was so great—hey, watch it, fella, that's my foot—how come she hasn't made any movies in fifty years? How come I haven't seen her on television? Even Bob Hope and George Burns, and they're older than God, are on TV."

"She's a recluse, has been for ages. Her most famous quote was rumored to be 'I want to be alone,' but in later years she claimed she never said—" There was a new hubbub outside in the courtyard, a hubbub that turned into what sounded very much like full-fledged pandemonium. "What the . . ." I moved out of the house on the tide; those nearest me were taking us with them.

"What's happening?" Heather suddenly sounded like a lost little girl.

"Benny!" I cried. "Benny! What's going on?"

Benny Goodman, he-of-the-perpetual smile (due no doubt to a lifelong attachment to the mouthpiece of the clarinet), shrugged. "Somebody said there'd been an accident, that's all I know."

Just ahead, nearer the core, I spotted Harry Belafonte. I clutched at his arm. "What's happening?"

"An accident, I think. Some kind of a hit-and-run."

"Jake! Jake! Over here! Has somebody been—"

"Mom! Papa!"



Heather, now clinging to her parents, had definitely metamorphosed into a schoolgirl, the pout was like totally (as she would say) gone.

Jake didn't answer me. There were gendarmes in conversation with him; they looked very serious. Even André, the genial gendarme who lived kitty-corner across the street from my shop and who practiced his bike-riding every morning on a stationary machine on his front gallery and who had an adorable little girl named Sofia looked like a cool, not to say cold but definitely chilled, stranger.

And Jake. Jake looked defeated. Jake, who was always up, Jake, who was always gay in the true sense of the word, Jake, who kept my spirits up when Ole Man Depression knocked on my door. Jake looked absolutely beaten. What *was* going on?

Kevin Greer told me. "They found some bigshot—Eliza somebody—in a smashup. Who's this Eliza? Everybody seems shook . . ."

"But what does that have to do with Jake?"

"They think Jake's car was involved. Don't ask me, ask your boyfriend."

I stared at him, echoes of Eliza saying nastily, "Some hunky male . . ." Surely Jake wouldn't . . . of course he wouldn't have taken violent umbrage. Don't even think such a thought! And besides, he hadn't heard her insinuation. Dimly I heard Doreen whimper, "Now how will we get back? Kevin, I want to go home. I mean really home— but how will we get back?"

I turned on her. "Oh, for God's

sake, shut up!" I tried to get to Jake's side but there were gendarmes in the way and my French has definite limitations, so by the time I had my conjugations all in a row they'd taken Jake away and Jeannette was back under her flamboyant tree.

This time a gendarme was at her side. He was taking the names and addresses of those departing, and that was just about everybody.

I buttonholed André. "Where have you taken Jake?" I demanded.

"Monsieur Greer?" A Gallic shrug. "Into Marigot. To the *gendarmerie*. For a brief time only. *C'est ne sérieux pas*." He wore that bland "I really don't know anything so don't ask" look that all gendarmes (and I suspect all police) wear when something big is going on behind the scenes and you're just a mere civilian without a clue.

"But André, there is a problem." On the island the operative word was problem, accent on the last syllable. The usual response was the one André came up with after I explained. "No problem, Madame Briscoe. One of our men will escort you to your *maison*."

"But it's not just me." I indicated the Greer trio, "We all came in Jake's car."

André acknowledged them with a brief bow. "*Mais oui*," he said. "No problem. *Tout le monde*." I'd often thought that if an islander admitted you had a problem you *really* had a problem.

"He's cute," announced Heather. "Yeah," muttered her father, "he's a real doll. Another fine mess Jake's got us into!"

I didn't sleep well. I went into my worry mode, I do that sometimes. My ex-husband Teddy had a good description of it: "You drag out every single little mistake and every single possible mistake like glassy marbles. You line them up and polish them one by one until they grow and gleam like giant Sisyphean labors . . ."

My first marble was whether I'd made my proper goodbyes to Jeanette. I'd call her come morning and set things right, that's what I'd do, and I'd commiserate. "Such a wonderful party and such a dreadful thing . . ." That led to the second (slightly larger) marble. I hadn't even laid eyes on Greta Garbo; would I ever get another chance? Which left me with a king-sized marble: would they hold Jake even if somebody had stolen his Rolls (that must have been the case) and smacked into Eliza as she came out of the party?

It must have been like that. Jake was at the party when Liza left—well, maybe not at that very moment but right after? Hadn't I thought it was taking him a long time to park, hadn't that thought fleetingly crossed my so-called mind . . .

Back up, Tori, come at this from another angle. Suppose somebody deliberately chose Jake's car as a murder weapon—maybe—there must be a bunch of people who had a hate against Eliza, and some of them must have been at this very party. And if it weren't Jake, and I was sure it wasn't Jake, then who the heck made an effort to get rid of Eliza Donner? (If that was the idea

and how come I couldn't simply buy the idea it was just a plain old rush to-get-away-with-a-stolen-car accident?) How badly was Eliza hurt and how could Jake be involved—he'd driven us there and gone to park while Eliza was still at her lectern under the flamboyant tree? Those were my *principales billes* (that means main marbles, I think).

Grmph, said my troubled brain, and I finally went to sleep.

Naturally I overslept and didn't get the shop open until after ten, and by the time I reached Jeanette's house by phone, she'd gone out, so I left a message with Miss Lizalette, her housekeeper. There was one shining moment: when I turned on my radio, I heard Jake's deep and comforting voice, wordlessly telling me that he was not locked up in the French hoosegow but was back on the air, free as an unfettered bird, thank God, and although Eliza had suffered a concussion and some broken bones and some inner bruises (that was the report), she wasn't dead, thank God for that, too—Island hospitals did their best, but they had definite limitations. Eliza, said Jake, was even now being airlifted to Puerto Rico.

He didn't say boo about his sojourn at the *gendarmierie*.

Come noontime (it was traditional on the island for businesses to take a two hour lunch break), I set off for the radio station. Jake was still talking trivia—anything that didn't have to do with Eliza's accident (or Garbo's whereabouts) I considered trivia—and if anyone knew anything about anything, it had to be Jake. The radio station

was a small cement-block building squatting atop a hilly point on the Dutch side.

The road to the station had been roughly bulldozed out of the side of the hill and required careful navigation, so by the time I got to the top, Jake was saying, "It's going on newstime, so I'll turn you over to my man Dick Beavers. Speaking of news, I've heard Jackie Onassis is back on the island but nobody's sure, could be it's just a rumor. And there's word, too, that Greta Garbo is gracing us with her reclusive presence. I guess y'all have heard about poor Eliza Donner. . . . well, here, I'll let Dick fill you in. Bless you all until tomorrow."

"Jake!" I grabbed him for air-kissing (almost everybody on the island air-kissed twice, once on each cheek, in the French fashion). "What happened?"

"All I know is that the gendarmes figure someone swiped my old Rolls, raced down the road toward Philipsburg, which happened to be Eliza's route, and knocked her Toyota into the drink at the hairpin turn where the road runs along the beach. Luckily another car was on its way out to Jeannette's, people named Perkins, do you know them? I don't. They stopped and hauled her out. The culprit was long gone, leaving my car with a smashed headlight and a dented fender. I guess I'll have to send to Merry Old England for parts. In the meantime, it still runs, you'll just have to put up with riding around in a dignity-less Rolls; Rosie (that's what I call her, Rosie Rolls) is psychologically crushed."

"How's Eliza's Toyota? It was a

new station wagon, I've seen her tootling around in it."

"Totalled. Sorry to leave you in the lurch at Jeannette's, but you guys got home all right—they told me at the *gendarmerie* they'd take care of you."

I gave my confused head a shake. "Do they think it was a murder attempt?"

He grinned wryly. "They didn't let me in on their reasoning. But I think maybe it was."

"So do I. But I don't know why. It must have been somebody from off-island, you know. Most of our crime is caused by off-islanders—and who on the island would have even considered stealing the Rolls? It's one of a kind, they couldn't possibly get away with it."

"That's why I think it was a homicide try. Somebody set me up. It was easy. I was parked next to Eliza. The perpetrator got behind my wheel and waited until she showed up. Duck soup."

"But how did anybody know she was leaving early? Did you see anybody around when you parked the car? And how come you found a spot next to her? I thought you'd have to drive way past to get a space, there were so many cars."

He shook his head. "Maybe somebody left before we got there. I'd gone all the way down the road almost as far as the Porter house, and you know that's a fur piece. I figured maybe I'd do better trying the other direction, and when I got back to Jeannette's, there it was, an empty spot. I thought I was just lucky." He shook his head again. "I've been trying to figure out who could have

done it. Not everybody loved Eliza, she was far too bossy with everybody and she had a wicked tongue, but I can't come up with any reason for attempted murder. That's what I call it. Attempted murder. I'll get Alain to talk to some of his pals. Maybe she insulted some local above and beyond the ordinary. The gendarmes are working on her house staff and her yard people, of course. I just can't fathom it. Not a single grapevine whisper . . ."

"Hey, they'll find out. Of course they will. I came to take you to lunch. I'll treat you to Le Tastevin." Usually Jake was my comforter, now it was payback time.

But again a headshake, "I've got to go home. Kevin and family are flying off, they've decided to try St. Bart's. I'm pretty sure they'll hate it, but when my brother gets hell-bent, it's hello Satan, good to see ya." He checked his watch. "Got to get going. They're flying out of L'Esperance at two. I wouldn't want them to miss their flight."

I smirked. "I'll bet you wouldn't. That Heather child, do you realize she didn't even know who Garbo is? Okay, okay, when you drop them off, you'll be near Le Tastevin. I'll be waiting for you; we can have a late lunch." I went for my car. "Don't forget."

He didn't even respond, just drove away. I sighed. I hadn't found out a single thing. Now, who would know where Garbo might be hanging her hat, assuming she had a hat? Eliza Donner would have, Eliza knew everything, but too late, too late, unless I hopped a plane to Puerto Rico. Jeannette must know.

I could drive by there on my way back to the French side. Of course she might not welcome an unexpected visitor at lunchtime the day after . . . what the heck. One thing for certain, Garbo wasn't going to be here forever, and never ever again would I get such an opportunity . . .

But (there's always a but, isn't there?) Jeannette was not in residence according to her Barbadian-born housekeeper, so curses, foiled again. Now I had to drive back to Grand Case through Marigot, and lately Marigot had become one big traffic jam. Well, I had plenty of time until I was due to meet Jake, and so what if I didn't open the shop until later. The season was just beginning; businesswise, I'd make up for it in due time.

It was in the middle of Marigot's anticipated *embouteillage* (that's traffic jam in French—it must have something to do with *emboucher*, which means to blow, as in horn, and *embouché*, which means foul-mouthed, if you get the implication) that I spotted Jeannette's car going the opposite way. And just behind that was a jazzy top-down convertible driven by Dulcinera and carrying Bebe and Dix O'Shaunessy (!), also going the other way, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, I could do to turn around and follow them, so I embouched my horn at nobody in particular and uttered some sotto voiced *embouchés* of my own. Nobody paid any attention, not one bit. I was just one of the bunch.

By the time I hooked up with Jake at Le Tastevin, I was bone-dry thirsty and starving. He had some

info on Eliza's condition. "She's still with us, according to André. On the critical list but she made the plane trip okay."

"Has André been bugging you again?"

Jake concentrated on the menu. "You can't blame him, can you? My car was involved."

"But somebody stole it. And that reminds me, *how* did they steal it? Didn't you lock it?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you lock your Volks?"

"Well, no. Phyllis Healey told me hardly anybody bothers because we're on an island and where can anybody run to on an island? But maybe we ought to get used to locking. Don't the gendarmes take fingerprints like U.S. cops? I thought that was routine all over the world."

"Sure they do. Bertillon was French."

"Who the devil was Bertillon?"

"The guy who came up with the fingerprint technique. I'm hungry as the devil. How do you feel about *crevettes et coquilles Saint-Jacques aux fine herbes*?"

"What was that old song—shrimpers and rice, they're very nice? Shrimpers and sea scallops are even better. Personally, I'm in the mood for *langouste*. You pick the wine, Jake. I'm a *vin-ignoramus*. And while we're at it, let's leave Eliza in skilled medical hands and drop the subject. Sooner or later, *vérité* will out. Or truth *il fait*, however they say it in French."

"Being an English major in my day, I prefer old Will S. He said 'truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long.'"

"Murder. I guess we've decided the hit-and-run was intentional? We've jumped to that conclusion because Eliza was the island resident whose name came up every time anybody said, 'Keep it under your sunshade but I can't stand . . . ' Yet accidents do happen. Maybe we're totally off base."

"I thought you'd decided we'd leave Eliza in medical hands."

"Right. Here's the wine list."

Leaving Eliza was not so simple. Everyone had an opinion. My Grand Case neighbor Elwige confided to me, "There are some who say the accident was due to obeah." Even as she said the word, she looked over her shoulder to catch a possible eavesdropper.

"Obeah? Really?" Obeah being the island version of voodoo. "I thought you told me nobody believes in obeah."

Elwige looked wise. "Some do." We were outside on our abutting galleries, just the two of us. No one could eavesdrop; still, she seemed edgy. I felt like saying, "Oh, Elwige, don't be silly," but of course I didn't. What I did say was, "Did you know Eliza Donner? Did you do any work for her?" Elwige was like a utility maid: she filled in for the regular maids when one was ill or away.

Elwige rolled her eyes at me. "No, Miss Tori, I couldn't work for that woman."

"Oh. I've heard she paid well."

"Miss Eliza? I didn't mean Miss Eliza. I mean her hoity-toity housekeeper. Miss Lizalette she calls herself. Miss! Thinks she's Miss God 'cause she's from Barbados. I don't do no work for no woman like that."

I could understand; even I felt uncomfortable in the presence of Lizalette.

"I see what you mean," I told her and gave some thought to going to bed. But just before I succumbed to yawns and went inside, a convertible roared down our narrow main street, going much too fast. Bebe was driving Dix and Dulcinera—somewhere. "Those young rascals," said Elwige indulgently.

"Living dangerously," I commented. "People that young don't believe anything bad can happen."

"Oh but it can," said Elwige, changing tone, changing mood. "Yes indeed, Miss Tori. It can. It surely can." Her words sounded ominous.

I glanced at her sharply, but she only nodded and went indoors. I was sure Elwige could tell me stories; maybe I'd hear them if I lived next door long enough. Two years on the island wasn't long enough, not by native standards. Secrets, the whole human race was full of secrets, I thought. What sort of secret lay behind the hit-and-run? If it had it been deliberate? Something basic like robbery—but nobody had had a chance to touch her jewelry, Jake said. I could imagine her lying there in the road bleeding on her diamonds. What motive lay behind it if it was attempted murder? And why would anyone choose Jake's car as a murder weapon? Everybody liked Jake, everybody I knew. . . . Give it up, Tori. Nobody gave you a snoop-er's license, you can't stand not knowing, can you, Miss Nosy, Miss Nosy of Grand Case. I wondered if there were a French word for nosy,

Mademoiselle Big-Nose; Mademoiselle Snout . . .

I didn't get the shop open until almost four, shame, shame on me. If your sign said open from nine to five, you should be open from nine to five, that was my motto, and now I'd gone back on my word. I felt as guilty as heck. My seamstress, Constance, had come to work and had lost patience, gone home. I didn't blame her. Constance was island-sensitive; I'd have to apologize, explain. After I shut up shop, I'd do just that. A pouting Constance was no thing of beauty, believe me.

Not surprisingly I had no customers. I'd begun to get my accounts in order, traveler's checks for deposit, credit card totals from the A.M., when I heard a car stop out front, footsteps in the main room of the shop. I pushed my accounts into a drawer and went in smiling. "Good afternoon."

Not one of the three answered. The two girls were pawing through the dress racks, the male went to the men's section. My irked cells went into action, and I said coolly, "May I help you? Or are you just browsing?"

Bebe turned away from the racks and looked at me with doe eyes. Dulcinera kept up her search. "Do you have anything like this?" asked Bebe, holding out a magazine page. It was a Nicole Miller, a simple-seeming black frock (linen?) that cost maybe not an arm and leg but at least a shinbone and an elbow.

"No. But we can copy it." I could be just as snooty as she.

"In white?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"



Now Dulcinea spoke. "How long would it take? Can we have them by next Saturday?"

Again I said, "Why not?" Why not encompassed a slew of possible why-nots, including fabric. I used hand-screened cottons shipped over from Jim Tillett in St. Thomas; for other fabrics I had to depend on Madame Duse's Maison de Fabrique in Philipsburg. White linen? She might have it, she might not. I took the chance. "A copy in white. You'll need a fitting. My seamstress has gone home for the day. What about tomorrow afternoon? Will that suit?"

"We want two," said Bebe. "One exactly like this in black, one in white. We've come to you because we couldn't possibly get them from New York or even Paris in time."

"They'll be pricey," I said. "*Cher chère.*"

They exchanged glances, Bebe shrugged, Dulcinea said, "No problem," and called out, "Dix. *Allez.* We are ready to go."

He came out of the men's department, cashmere sweater in hand. Bebe took it from him, looked it over, said, "We'll take this. Put it on our account." And they left.

I had to gripe to somebody, so I called Phyllis, she'd understand. "And he didn't even speak, the creep."

"Arrogance personified," she agreed. "I almost hate to see them coming."

"I suppose they're good for it. That sweater was a couple of hundred bucks. And I'm going to charge the same for these dresses."

"Oh, they'll pay. Or more to the point, Dulcinea's father will pay.

Hey, what do you think about Eliza's so-called accident?"

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"Are you kidding? I'd wager Eliza is the most disliked person on the island, Dutch side *and* French."

"Well, if somebody meant to do her in, they missed their target."

"Uhm. Do you suppose they'll try again?"

"That's a thought." But why, why, why? "I guess she's safe enough in San Juan."

"Yeah. Did you hear the story about San Juan and Puerto Rico?"

"Lots of stories but no standout. Tell me."

"When they made the map, they got the names mixed up. You know most of the islands are named after the saints—St. Martin, St. Barthélemy, St. Catherine a.k.a. St. Kitts, St. Thomas, and so forth. So, the story goes, Puerto Rico was supposed to be St. John's, alias San Juan, and the city Puerto Rico which, of course you know, means Rich Port."

All of which made sense to me; the Caribbean islands were full of surprises. Every one had a different personality generated by its history, and every one had a mixed up history: the Spanish, Dutch, British, French, and Danes had all been landlords at one time or another. Only France maintained its control. Holland and England retained paternal ties, and their islands by and large were autonomous. Puerto Rico was a U.S. Territory, and we still babysat the U.S. Virgins. My ambition was to spend a little time on every island, from the Brit-

ish Virgins to Trinidad and Tobago, from Curaçao in the southwest to Cuba in the north. So far, I'd set foot on Anguilla and St. Barts. I had a long way to go.

I was in the process of calling Madame Duse regarding black and white linen when Marlene Kessler stuck her head in the door. "Have you heard, Tori?" she asked. "Isn't it too bad?"

"Excuse me, madame," I said to the telephone. To Marlene I said, "Heard what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry—you're busy. I just thought you'd want to know. Eliza Donner is dead. Her funeral is scheduled for Thursday. Right here in Grand Case. In St. Mary's by the Sea." She fluttered her fingers at me, and the head went away.

"What? What?" squawked the voice on the phone. I told Madame Duse the news, and that explains how the grapevine works on St. Martin. She said she'd try to come up with the fabric I needed. "Maybe I get a good amount of black linen. Maybe the funeral ladies need black." Ah, the astute French businesswoman, so typical. "Call me Tuesday," she said. "I get *par avion* from Puerto Rico."

Eliza Donner was dead. If it had been murder, mission accomplished.

The big Catholic church in Grand Case was filled for Eliza's funeral. Jake came late ("Traffic," he whispered) and slid in beside me just as the famed choir of St. Mary's burst into what might be loosely defined as song. Elwige had told me they'd be appearing, I should say warned me. St. Mary's choir was famed, all right, and not for its musical exper-

tise. "What are they singing?" whispered Jake. I told him I thought it was "Amazing Grace" but I wasn't sure.

"I didn't know Eliza was Catholic," he said. "I didn't know she was anything."

"She wasn't, but Miss Lizalette is president of the altar league here and she's in charge of the funeral arrangements. Well, somebody had to be, it seems Eliza had no kith nor kin."

"That's interesting. I wonder who inherits her worldly belongings."

"I understand that Jean Luc Parvenue, Esquire, has her will."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "My, my, you're just a fount of information, aren't you?"

"My neighbor Elwige hears all and tells me. Along with Marlene Kessler and Phyllis Healey and—"

"Oh, what songs the sirens sang," muttered Jake. An island lady behind him poked him with her prayer book. He looked sheepish, whispered, "Sorry."

I waited a minute before I whispered back, "Don't look so superior. Passing the word is the pipeline lifeline of this island."

"Ah, now we're being cute. All right, I've heard some things, too."

"What? What?" Now the island lady poked me. I smiled at her weakly. Very weakly.

"Later," he hissed. And we bent our heads in prayer.

As we waited for the hearse outside the church, I nudged him.

"What? You said you'd heard some things."

"The sous-prefect has officially requested a copy of the will. They

think maybe—well, I don't actually know what they think, but I think they think the murder has something to do with the will."

"All that money, as motive that makes sense. Wow, there go the beautiful trio again, racing through town. And right in the middle of a funeral procession. Those girls are going to get themselves killed. Somebody should fine them or something, make them slow down."

"Who's going to do that, hmm? They've been spoiled rotten since birth. Listen, come with me tonight to the casino; I want to catch Dix's performance. The gendarmes talked to him after Eliza's Toyota went pancake, but they talked to a lot of people. I'm curious about his reaction. You'd think he'd show some sign of respect for a dead lover, but he didn't even come to the funeral, unless you count that drive-by as a visit."

"Jake," I said, "I've thrown in the towel, I've joined the older generation, I don't understand half of what these young people do any more. Sure, I'll go with you tonight. Do you want me to meet you there?"

"No, I'll pick you up. Want to have dinner? At Bil Bouquet's? I'll come round about seven, okay?"

"Can we go dutch?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Are you kidding?"

"Okay, okay. I just didn't want anybody to think I'm a date or anything like that."

He glared.

"And what's wrong with having a date with me?"

"Well, you know. I don't want to ruin your reputation."

And now it seemed to me he actually looked hurt.

"Don't count yourself a senior citizen yet, Tori. I don't understand what you're talking about any more than I understand my niece Heather. I'll be here at seven, and we won't go dutch."

As he drove off in a real or pretended huff, I thought how too bad it was that Jake Greer was gay. I liked him, I liked him a lot, his sense of humor and his inner sweetness—maybe only gay men were gifted with those personality pluses. Certainly my ex-husband Teddy lacked both. But gay is gay and friends was what we'd be. Better than nothing. A lot better.

Bil Bouquet's (the words refer to that paddle game with a ball attached to a rubber band; the ball gets batted up and with luck comes back down on the paddle so you can hit it again—that's a *bilboquet* in case you care) was an interesting restaurant perched on a hillside on the Dutch side. Two American guys had conceived it and ran it, and the food was good, good, good. It was a small place, held maybe thirty people, so we were two of a select few, almost all acquaintances. I thought they looked curiously in our direction, no doubt wondering what I was doing with Jake or vice versa. Well, it wasn't any of their business if we wanted to be friends. I greeted greeters somewhat icily, and Jake, when seated, said, "Hey, you mad at somebody?"

"Who? Me? Nah. I'm just putting on the cooler-than-a-cucumber act. Who was it who decided that a cu-

cumber was the epitome of cool, anyway?"

"Probably some rejected zucchini. You're looking snatz tonight, by the way."

"Snatz? Is that a new word?"

"Probably not, I just heard it somewhere, sometime, maybe in my dreams. What's your dining preference? Tonight's specials seem to be rack of lamb or *langouste*. You had that the other day, want an encore?"

"Evening, folks. How are you tonight? Hey, you just missed dining with one of the biggies, Greta Garbo. She just left with her entourage." Bob, one half of Bil Bouquet, had come to take orders and break my heart.

I uttered an unoriginal *em-bouché*. Then, "Sorry, guys. I've been trying to lay eyes on that woman ever since she got here. What did the great one have to eat?"

"She's a vegetarian, you know."

"That's no help, I'm a carnivore myself. So what does she look like, Bob? Is she still beautiful?"

"She still looks like Garbo. Older, of course. And she's all covered up. Beige is the color of choice. She wore a big-brimmed beige hat over a beige headscarf, and she had on a beige cardigan over a beige shirt with beige slacks, a real monotone. And speaking of monotone, she doesn't say much, but what she does say is spoken in husky tones. Did you ever see that old film where she says, 'Give me a visky . . .'? She sounds like that."

"Who was she with? Don't look at me like that, Jake. I know it's an obsession. All I want to do is see her."

"Joe Ambrose paid the check. I suppose she's staying at his place in Guana Bay. He's got plenty of room in that big house, and she's got a bunch of people with her. So what is it, lamb or lobster?"

"I'll have the lamb," said Jake. "You're holding up the works, Tori. Say something."

"Make it two, Bob. Darn it, I ask very little of life these days . . ."

"Tori," said Jake sweetly, "shut up. Bob, bring us a bottle of your best red; I'm going to get the lady loaded."

The Fiesta Room at the casino had a picture of Dix O'Shaunessy on an easel at the door. He photographed like a gilded god. Jake had thought to make reservations, so we had a table waiting. Good thing; the place was crowded, tourist season was clearly blossoming early.

The band was good. Jake said, "Let's dance," so we did. He was a good dancer, very good. Hey, I thought, we make a goodlooking couple, all systems go. Too bad that . . . hey, girl, stop the whining.

"Oh-oh," said Jake looking over my head.

"Oh-oh what?"

I looked where he looked and caught a glimpse of a passel of gendarmes. Into his ear I whispered, "What would they be doing here?"

Jake swung me around so that we ended up near the entranceway. "Let's find out."

The maître d' was listening to rapid French. I missed several words but caught the gist and translated.

"They want to see Monsieur O'Shaunessy. The maître d' says he isn't here, he's late."

"We'll wait," said the gendarme in charge. (He was from the Mari-got contingent, so I didn't know his name.) He spoke in quite perfect English. The maître d' glared at him and gestured. I took the gesture to mean "do as you damn well please," and so did the gendarmes. They came inside and settled around a rear table. The maître d' glared again and went off, and Jake danced me away.

We had another drink and danced some more. The band produced a female singer who sang in Spanish, wiggling a lot in the process. The maître d' was table-hopping; there was much raising of the shoulders and fluttering of the hands. I took it to be a form of placation. The star attraction was late, and the natives were getting restless.

"Oh-oh," said Jake again. "There's the Dutch police detachment headed up by His Honor the Governor, of all people! Something big is afoot, Tori. Excuse me a few minutes, please. I'm going to go check it out."

"I'll go with you." Curiosity was sapping my patience.

Jake shook his head and laid a stay-there hand on my shoulder. "I'll be right back." Reluctantly I sat and watched while the maître d' spoke again to the gendarmes and the gendarmes en masse got up and went out after Jake, forming a gaggle outside the Fiesta Room. The gaggle was drawing a crowd from the gambling contingent; some in the Fiesta Room left their tables to see what was going on, and I went with them. "I'll be right back," my eye! Men!

Jake intercepted me on my way

out. "I've got to go to the station," he said without preamble. "Since I'm playing chauffeur, you'll have to come along. Sorry, Tori, sorry. Leonardo"—this last to the maître d'—"I'll settle up later." And he all but ran from the casino with me trotting at his heels asking, "What's happening, Jake? What's going on?"

"Terrible accident," he muttered once we reached the car. "On the road to the airport. Five dead, three in the hospital. And they've solved the murder of Eliza Donner."

We passed the scene of the accident, two vehicles, one a casino van used to transport workers, the other a white convertible—once a white convertible, now a heap of twisted metal lying like a giant roadkill, all four wheels in the air. "Not the beautiful trio!" I said.

He reported it all on the airwaves. Bebe Javert, Dulcinera Villeneuve, and Dix O'Shaunessy had been killed in a head-on collision on the airport road near the entrance to the Caravanserai. Also dead were two casino dealers, whose names were unfamiliar as were the names of three kitchen workers now in hospital in Philipsburg. The car, driven by Bebe Javert, had been en route to the casino, where gendarmes and Dutch authorities were waiting to arrest Dix O'Shaunessy for the murder of Eliza Donner. His mother, Eliza Donner. Dix O'Shaunessy's mother was Eliza Donner. I kept that mantra going until it finally sank into my head. Dix O'Shaunessy's mother had been his lover, Eliza Donner!

"You don't *know* they were lov-

ers," said Jake trying to temper my shock.

"But everybody said—"

"Everybody says lots of things."

"But why would he—"

"Well, look at the picture. She abandoned him at birth. Left him on the doorstep of an orphanage just like in the old melodramas. Somehow he found out where she was.

"It must have been an obsession, finding his mother. I'm only guessing, but I'd wager he spent a lot of time and money looking for her, tracked her down. You gotta have a big bundle of resentment if you're that doorstep waif. I'd say they had some kind of confrontation and she went off in a huff and he went after her in the nearest set of wheels available."

I put up my hand to stop him. "That's so awful."

"Yeah." Jake reached for, of all things, a handkerchief (Jake still carried a handkerchief in his breast pocket!) and handed it to me. I didn't know why I was crying. I didn't especially care for Eliza Donner, and I didn't know Dix O'Shaunessy at all, but I felt so joyless. What a sad world this was; first my divorce, and then Jake, a man I liked a lot (admit it, girl), was gay, and then this terrible real-life soap opera . . . I turned tears to sniffles. "How do they know he was her son?"

He pulled me close to comfort me. "It was in her will. She named him. Left her estate to him. Too late."

I teared up again. Too late, too late . . . "Oh, Jake, why do you have to be gay?"

He backed off from me; when he spoke, his voice was harsh. "What

makes you think I'm a homo?" He looked cross, very cross indeed.

"Well—everybody, I mean, everybody thinks . . . everybody says . . . Eliza Donner, she—"

"Eliza Donner!" He rose abruptly, stepped away. He stood with his back to me, shoulders hunched. I could see his hands clenching, unclenching, and then he turned back, held out his arms. "Tori," he said, "Don't believe everything you hear. I'm not gay. Never have been. Never will be." Even though it was the middle of the island night, the sun shone in his smile.

But come morning the sky was overcast and the sea outside my window had lost its sparkle and the Radio Jake said there was a weather disturbance in the South Atlantic and I wondered if I'd dreamed the whole night before. Until I ran into Marlene Kessler at the Food Center, who greeted me with, "Oh, Tori, have you ever heard of anything more disgusting? She seduced her own son. Do you think she knew he was her son? It would be so much better if she didn't know, don't you think? Jeff was so surprised he said you could knock him over with a seagull feather. He knew Eliza was a witch, but this! Well, we really can't blame the boy. Just think how you'd feel if you made love to somebody and then found out they were telling you this horrible lie . . ."

Echoing Jake I said, "We don't know that they were lovers."

Marlene smiled pityingly. "You're sweet, Tori. But really. Everybody knew."

"Everybody said. That doesn't necessarily mean it's true."



She patted my shoulder. "All right, dear. Whitewash all you want. But all that aside, the murder itself—so brutal. I wonder what set him off. Did Jake say anything?"

"Jake? What would Jake know?"

"Well, he saw them, didn't he? I understand that he was the one who put the gendarmes onto Dix—he saw the two of them arguing."

"He saw them arguing?"

"Well, yes. He must have. When he was walking up to Jeannette's after parking his car. We'd just left that parking place, you see, but we had to go way up to the next driveway to turn around, and on our way back we saw Jake—he was walking, just turning into Jeannette's. So we must have just missed them. Eliza and Dix. All we saw as we came back by was Jake's car parked in our spot, and Jeff said, hey, that was Jake's Rolls, he really lucked out, any new arrival will have to park in Marigot . . ."

"But he couldn't have seen them. He didn't say a word. He must have just missed Eliza. Maybe he just saw Dix arriving. Was he walking? How did Dix get there, anyway? If he drove, what did he do with his car before he stole Jake's Rolls? Or did Bebe and Dulcinera deliver him? Maybe this whole story is just a rumor. Like so many other things. This place is a hotbed of rumors."

Marlene shook her head in somber agreement. "I don't know what to believe any more. The island is changing, Tori. So many new people. When we moved here, you knew everybody on the whole island, from that tall luggage handler at the air-

port, you know the one, with the little head and the big red cap, to the taxi driver named Gumbs, who drove that ancient Buick." She sighed. "Well, whatever. It's over. I guess justice has been done. All around."

Justice, from a higher power. And Jake hadn't said word one about seeing Eliza and Dix, not to me. He'd kept a secret. From me. Somehow I hadn't expected Jake to keep a secret. From me.

The magic words "Greta Garbo" brought me out of my thoughts. "We just took our homeward guests to the airport, and Greta Garbo was leaving as well. She must be terribly coldblooded, she was all covered up in a scarf with hat on top and a longsleeved sweater and long pants and it's so hot today, our thermometer at home registered close to ninety-four and that's hot for us, you know . . ."

"She was *leaving*?"

"Are you all right, Tori? You look so—distressed."

I produced a smile.

"I'm just crushed to hear she's gone. I never laid eyes on the woman, you know. All the time she was here."

"Hi there, Tori! We're back from our island tour. Jake told us we'd hate it, but we had a ball." I might have missed Garbo, but I'd found Kevin and Doreen and Heather Greer hanging over the meat counter looking like cartoon tourists in tie-dyes and jeans. It was Kevin who gave me the jovial greeting. Jake came behind him, wheeling the shopping cart.

"Well, the Greers in the flesh. I didn't know you were due today. Where've you come from, St. Bart's?" I tried to send Jake a message, something about a bone to pick.

"Oh no, we only stayed a couple of days on St. Bart's." This Heather was quite another child, suntanned, smiling, bright-eyed, "We've been to a bunch of islands. St. Lucia and Martinique and Antigua . . . I think I liked Antigua the best. We've had a wonderful time."

"They surprised me," said Jake. "When I got home last night, there they were. Waiting on the doorstep." His eyes said, sorry, Tori. His mouth said, "They're island-oriented, ready to enjoy St. Martin now. We'll have to show them the sights."

"Yes, of course."

"I'll give you a call and set some dates up. Okay?"

"Yes. Fine." And they went their food-buying way while I wondered why Jake acted so unlike Jake when

he was around his brother. And *why* hadn't he mentioned seeing Dix with Eliza that night? And did it really take him that long to park his car? And why did I have these little qualms, was my ex the reason? Had six years with Teddy turned me into a doubting Thomasi-na? And then there was my *nouveau principale bille* just discovered in the bottom of my marble bag: was it true, Jake was not and never had been gay?

I liked him so much. Why was I plagued with these questions?

I took my cart up to the checkout station, and while the clerk totaled my groceries up, I could hear Jake's voice in the background and I could hear Heather's replies and Doreen's snicker and it came to me that my ex-husband wasn't to blame for my problem.

My problem was that I was looking in all the wrong places for . . . Garbo.

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FICTION

# THE WITCH AND THE RELIC THIEF



M. J. Jones

*Illustration by Patrick Timmes*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/00*

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KINGDOM OF WESSEX AND  
ALL ENGLAND  
*Anno Domini 979*

“**W**e want you to catch a witch,” the abbot said.

“Ain’t in the witch business,” I said. “Saints are my line.”

“So I’ve heard.” He reached for the silver flagon on the table.

The two of us were drinking ale in the guest parlor of Bracknel Monastery. That’s down south of London, and the abbot’s name was Hylltun. He was a little bit of a man with a doughy face and inky hands that told you he spent too much time on books.

Me, I’m Tryffin ap Tewdwr. I sell saints. Their parts, too, if that’s the best I can do—St. Ninnie’s foot, say, or St. Peter’s sword. In other words, I’m a relicmonger. I’m Welsh, too, but even so, I’ve got King Ethelred’s warrant to do business with church or monastery, canon or archbishop. Every cleric in England knows Tryff Tewdwr’ll find ’em all the holy bones they want. And they’re not always too fussy about how I do it so long as the price is right.

I also do a little bounty hunting. It’s not something I’m awful proud of. But saints are scarce in this fallen world, and a man has to make a living. Which is why I went to Bracknel Monastery soon as I got the abbot’s message.

“Saints’re my line,” I told him. “Witches cost extra.”

Abbot Hylltun pretended like he didn’t hear that last part. He went straight to his tale of witchery at Bracknel.

See you, when clerics talk about a witch, they mean someone in league with Satan. I’m not saying I doubt ’em. But the witches I know are mainly old widows trying to scrape by as best they can. They sell charms to the love-struck or the vengeful, and sometimes they cure the sick.

You can find a witch’s house on the edge of any village in England. Wales and France and Italy, too. Just look for the ailing lined up in her lane. Presently the old woman’ll come out, pass her hands over ’em, mumble a few words, then lay on some herbs. Like as not, the patients walk away feeling much better. Either that or they die. And it wouldn’t turn out any different if word and weed came from a priest instead.

At least that’s how it is with most witches. But this one, Abbot Hylltun claimed, was a whole other tale.

He took a last pull of drink and tucked his hands under his black scapular. “For quite a while we’ve been finding strange things, wicked things, on one or another of the monastery doorsteps,” he said. “Little hearts pierced by feathers, strings of fresh vermin gut, rats with their heads torn off. And blood spattered all over.”

Innards and fresh blood on the doorstep sounded bad all right. Like somebody was for sure trying to cast a nasty spell on these monks. I asked who’d want to do such a thing.

“We don’t know,” the abbot said. “Nor do we know whether it’s a witch acting alone or someone employing a witch. But it always happens at night. Therefore, we want

you to stand night watch, find this fiend's companion."

For a while I gazed at the monastery's jeweled ale cups, the silver flagon, the gilded serving dish. Then I said, "Don't misunderstand me, abbot, it ain't I don't want to help you out. But there's a couple of dozen monks here at Bracknel. How come you don't set a few of 'em to walking the monastery after dark?"

"We have done. On those nights either nothing happens or it happens but no one sees," he said, blessing himself against this devil's work.

I didn't ask what made him think it'd be any different with me around. Why bother? I didn't mind spending a couple of nights outside, even in February and in the company of a witch. After all, I'd have the monastery's blessing. More important, I'd have the monastery's silver.

But when I named my price, Abbot Hylltun showed he was a true monastery man, close-tonsured and close-fisted, too. Made me bargain harder'n a French fishwife on Friday till I got what I asked. Most of it, anyhow.

Bracknel wasn't one of your Italian monasteries, all neat and square and plumb. Its crooked wood buildings—church, chapter house, dormitory, sheds, stable, brewery—were jumbled together like timber in an oxcart. Only the latrine and cook-house, neither of 'em any too tidy, stood by themselves. Around the whole place there rambled a rock wall built high enough to keep the Northmen out and the monks in.

Come nightfall Bracknel got black as the Pit. As I found out when I

went on watch by the chapter house door. That's where the abbot said most of the blood and innards had turned up. Right after Compline I plunked myself in the passage twixt chapter house and brewery, my back against the brewery wall, legs stretched across the narrow alley. That way someone coming from the south couldn't get past me and, dark though it was, I'd see anyone else.

Just in case I did, I got my knife out. It was a big English scramasax, and I knew how to put it to good use. Still, even with knife at the ready I felt a little scared there in that dark alley. Generally St. Nicholas gives me good protection wherever I am, but evil can creep up on you even in a monastery. And the night'd turned cold. I pulled my cloak tight around me, then took to shivering anyhow.

'Course I wasn't too scared to get sleepy. That's what happens when you stay up past sunset, so I don't make much apology about it. But if I'da kept full awake, I'da for sure snared the wicked thing that all of a sudden came whipping down that passage. Instead, all I caught was the chill wind of its passing.

I chased after it, you bet I did. Down the alley, up another, across the yard to the cloister gate.

The gate stood wide open. But even with the new-risen moon throwing out some light, I couldn't see a soul beyond. Nor did I hear foot fall or hoof beat. Only thing around was a big black cat blinking at me from atop the cloister wall.

There was nothing back on the chapter house doorstep, either. Or on any other doorstep in the cloister.

Maybe, thought I, the thing in the passage was a dream, some figment of my own Welsh fancy. More likely it was just a cold wind blowing down an alley. The world's full of unseen spirits and sprites and evil imps, but that doesn't mean they come visiting Tryff Tewdwr.

Still, there'd been a mean feel to whatever blew past me in that alley. The shivers came on me again. I quick-like cured 'em, though, in the brewery.

Whilst I drank the monks' ale, I thought about the wild wind Welsh magicians travel around in. And about how the French claim cats carry evil. 'Specially black cats.

St. Nicholas help me, thought I. What if I've been visited after all? Or, worse yet, what if I've been warned?

Next morning, after a well-earned nap out in the stable with my horse, I met up with Abbot Hylltun again. This time it was in the abbot's lodge, and there were a couple of other monks with him. The three of 'em sat at a big oak table. On it lay a leather sack bulging nice and fat with what I hoped might be my pay.

"Well, Welshman," the abbot said, "you let the evil one escape you."

He had a black cat draped across his shoulders. I didn't like the look on either one of their faces.

"We'll disregard that failure, however," he said, "for we now know who our witch is. Not one of your good country grannies, I can assure you, innocently healing the sad and the stricken. We're dealing with a real devil woman. She's committed—" His voice dropped to a mean-

ingful whisper. "She's committed *invultuacio*." All three monks crossed themselves.

First I thought he meant the woman'd been letting the local lads have their way with her. Or, worse, she was having her way with the lads. Then I remembered the Latin the monks beat into me back in Wales.

"*Invultuacio*," I said. "That's when a witch, with the Devil for helper, makes a likeness of her enemy and sticks pins in it."

"The enemy dies a rather nasty death," Abbot Hylltun said.

Just then the cat leaped off the abbot's shoulder and ran to the lodge door. Abbot Hylltun flicked a forefinger at one of the monks. "Put him out, Cole."

The monk called Cole didn't move, and I didn't blame him. He was the monastery's prior—its second-in-command. Abbot Hylltun had no business treating him like a peasant. For a while abbot and prior had 'em a staring match, and believe me, there was blood in their eye.

Finally the third monk—Brother Boda—let the cat out. He was a tall, shambling young redhead with a lopsided, loose-mouthed grin on his round face. Not, thought I, someone you'd call over-bright. But Abbot Hylltun dropped out of the staring contest to tell me it was Brother Boda who'd found out who had been strewing blood and guts around the monastery.

"While you, Welshman," the abbot said, "were engaged in chasing my cat across the cloister—oh yes, you were seen—the evil one was busy elsewhere. Tell him, Boda."



For a moment Brother Boda looked terrified. Not so much at what he'd found out as at having to put it in words. He grunted a little, groaned some, then gave Prior Cole a pleading glance. "Vuh-bruh-?" he said.

Prior Cole, unlike the bookish little abbot, had the mien of a real man. For one thing he was big. Bigger than me, even. And he had the kind of nose a man gets when he's taken some hard punches. From the size of his fists, I guessed he'd thrown a few, too.

Prior Cole pulled the bulging leather sack across the table and reached inside. Aha, thought I. I'm going to get paid after all.

He took out a dead hedgehog.

My mouth dropped to my tunic hem, then right down to my shoe-tops when I saw it wasn't a hedgehog either.

It was a doll—a doll studded with nails.

Abbot Hylltun took—snatched—the doll from the prior. "As you can see, we're dealing with a true devil woman."

"Vuh-dev-vuh," Brother Boda said.

"Take a close look," the abbot said.

At first, I didn't want to touch the doll. You never know what a thing like that might get up to. But after the abbot promised it'd been properly exorcised, I took a deep breath and picked it up.

Except for the nails sticking out of its head, heart, and crotch, it seemed no different from any other little girl's doll baby. It was maybe a foot long, made out of dirty linen and stuffed with straw. For clothes it

wore a hooded, full-length black cloak.

"Does kind of look like a monk," I said. "And you say you know who made it?"

The abbot said, "Her name's Aelfreda. She lives nearby."

So, I was willing to bet, did a lot of folks capable of sticking pins in a doll. "What makes you think it came from this Aelfreda?" I asked.

"Dev-vuh," Brother Boda said.

The abbot said, "Aelfreda's work is quite well-known hereabout. Her little figures often turn up on thresholds, in mangers, under doorsteps. They always look exactly like the person they're aimed at, and within a fortnight that person always comes to grief."

"Sounds like she should've been punished long since."

Prior Cole said, "As a matter of fact she *has* been punished. Holy church has several times condemned her to fast on bread and water. Twice it was for three years and once for seven."

Woof, thought I. Seven years on bread and water meant one of Aelfreda's victims had died. She'd have got the same for any homicide.

"The church is a fount of mercy," I said. Then, knowing how hard English law is on witches, I asked how come she hadn't gone before the shire court, too.

Abbot Hylltun took a sudden interest in the tabletop, but the prior's knowing smirk gave me the answer. Aelfreda had friends in high places.

I said, "Any other reason you think it's her? Maybe there's a new witch in the neighborhood. Or may-

be somebody wants you to put the blame on Aelfreda."

The little abbot gave me a good hard glare. He said, "That doll is Aelfreda's work, no doubt about it. She likes to stick a nail between the legs."

"Why would she want to plant a doll at your gate? What's she got against you all?"

"Probably nothing," the abbot said. "Our neighbor Lord Stanfeld is another matter. And Aelfreda is his churl."

Churl may be the English word for free peasant, but all the average churl owns free and clear is his hide. Everything else—house, ox, privy—belongs to the landlord. It's pretty much the same the world over. And it's why tenants pretty much do what their lord wants 'em to.

"Stanfeld," the abbot said, "is a royal thane. As such, he assumes that right after Easter, when young King Ethelred gives out gifts at his coronation, he will get King Wood. He's wrong, of course. Bracknel will be the wood's new owner."

The abbot said King Wood was the forest that lay twixt the monastery and Stanfeld's hall. Until recently it'd been a royal hunting preserve. But twelve-year-old King Ethelred, who'd stepped over a dead brother on his way to the throne, would naturally want to make sure the church was on his side. Lord Stanfeld, on the other hand, was just a backwoods nobleman with only the one estate and no son to inherit it anyhow.

Abbot Hylltun said, "We suspect that in order to get King Wood Stanfeld has laid a curse on us and is us-

ing Aelfreda as his cat's-paw to carry it out. Unfortunately, we can't accuse him because he is not directly involved. The woman, however, is well-known as a witch. She will be punished."

"What you waiting on, then?" I said. "Bring her in, send for the king's reeve, and start the trial. Maybe Stanfeld'll get the message. The king will for sure."

Just what he had in mind, Abbot Hylltun said. "But Stanfeld won't let Aelfreda go without a fight. And as all England knows, there are men who have no qualms about visiting physical harm on monks and monasteries. Sometimes considerable harm."

"Quite the lad is Stanfeld," I said. "Goes in for curses and cudgels both."

"Indeed," Abbot Hylltun said. "Therefore, we can't just have our witch arrested. You must catch her in flagrante delicto."

Which meant spending who knew how many more nights out in the cold. But what choice did I have? It was freeze my toes in the cloister alley or limp back home broke as the day I left.

After we left the abbot's lodge, Prior Cole said he'd help me catch Aelfreda. He didn't say exactly how. Then, wouldn't you know, Brother Boda up and volunteered, too. The prior sent him to the churchhouse. "The best way you can help," he said, "is to pray."

It was a good idea all the way around, and it sure pleased Brother Boda. The grin on the young red-head's face couldn't have been wider.

He knelt for a blessing, then trotted off across the cloister yard.

Where the monastery's workday was in full swing. Whilst one gang of monks dug parsnips in the kitchen garden, others were feeding the geese and mucking out the stableyard and unloading a cart full of cowhide. From the far side of the wall came the shouts of somebody chasing down a runaway pig.

We stood beside the forge and watched a little bald fellow pump bellows bigger'n he was. Presently I said, "I got a couple of problems with this Aelfreda and her dolly."

Prior Cole nudged me away from the forge to walk along the metalled paths that crisscrossed the cloister. "It's no wonder you have problems," he said. "The abbot, in his splendid wisdom, gave you very little information. How can I make remedy?"

"First off, why'd Aelfreda all of a sudden change from planting blood and guts to planting a doll? And don't say it's 'cause big bad me's around now. It wasn't me that found the doll."

The prior ran a hand over his jaw. "Hmm," he said sagely.

"Another problem's got to do with Brother Boda finding the doll. How come he was out of the dormitory, middle of the night? Abbot gave strict orders that from bedtime till the night office I was the only one s'posed to be up and around."

The prior let out a light laugh. "Oh," he said. "I expect Boda wanted to be the hero in all this. He's not quite the simpleton he appears, you know. He likes to show off. And he's been caught wandering around in the night before. Once he went as

far as King Wood following a tomat on the prowl or so he claimed."

Poor adventure-hungry lad, thought I. He'd probably been a boy-oblade, walled up in the monastery since he was ten. Chucked there by a father who knew what to do with the family rubbish. Just like mine did. But that's another story.

The prior said, "There's another possibility you should know about." He flicked his eyes back and forth across the cloister. When he saw nobody was close, he said, "A possibility I suppose I shouldn't mention, perhaps shouldn't even think."

In a low voice he said, "Abbot Hylltun may have wanted to make sure King Ethelred gave the Wood to the monastery. Ethelred's only a boy, you know, and Stanfeld has friends at court. Persuasive friends who know the way to a child's heart."

"So?"

The prior drew a deep breath. "I think it's quite possible that the abbot got hold of one of Aelfreda's dolls; she strews them around like seed-corn. Then he put it before the gate and arranged for Boda to find it."

When I looked doubtful, the prior said, "Hylltun was out of his cell last night. I know because mine is right next door and I heard him leave."

"I didn't see him around the cloister. Hear him, either."

"An abbot can be very stealthy," Prior Cole said. "In or out of his felt night shoes."

That was interesting, maybe even true, but for the next couple of nights nothing more happened at Bracknel. I mean no evil came our way,

though I did catch Brother Boda up and about when he shouldn't have been. Found him sitting on the brewery floor, swilling ale and tossing catmint to the abbot's big black cat, both of 'em drunk as lords.

He begged me not to tell on him and I didn't. Not that night. Or the next, when he was back in the brewery, sober and without the cat, claiming he wanted to help me stop the ev—ev—evil at Bracknel.

It wasn't a bad idea. I could keep my eye on him, and he might even turn out to be of some use. 'Course, it'd be a hard sell to Abbot Hylltun. But I had had plenty of experience peddling peculiar things to reluctant clerics.

Brother Boda went on watch the next night, and just as the prior'd said, he wasn't stupid. Tongue-tied maybe, but a keen-eyed, silent-footed sentinel—and nobody's fool when it came to monastery politics. As I found out a few nights later when our patrol paths crossed near the chapter house.

"Been thinking," I said to him, "about something around here that seems kind of funny."

"Lot—lot—lot of things funny here. Longer you stay, funnier they get."

"Your prior and your abbot," I said, "they don't like each other much, do they?"

By then we'd opened up our lantern hoods, and I could see Brother Boda pulling at a hank of his red hair. Finally he busted out in a lopsided grin. "You really a re-relic thief?"

Ignoring his bad manners, I said, "What is it twixt the two of 'em? Just another clerics' tussle over the

power and the glory, or is there something special?"

He pulled at his hair some more, before he said, "King Wood. They both want the cred—cred—"

"The credit for convincing King Ethelred to give it to Bracknel?"

He wagged his head up and down. "And for getting Aelfreda caught."

So, thought I, it's politics as usual here at Bracknel. Why ain't I surprised?

"A man who has the king's ear can go far," I said. "At court and in the church, too. *Bishop* Hylltun, *Abbot* Cole—names with a real nice ring to 'em."

Brother Boda gave me another of his grins. This time it showed a mouth full of pointy teeth.

Two nights later, whilst I was on watch at the front gate, something hit it with a good, solid thunk. I yanked open the wicket. On the ground below lay a doll. And tearing off into the night went a woman.

When finally I chased her down, I found out the abbot was wrong—Aelfreda wouldn't need Stanfeld and his churls in a fight. She could bite and scratch and yowl worse'n a cat in heat.

Wasn't any need for it, you ask me. All I did was throw an elbow round her neck. A smart somebody would've just stood there till they found out what was going on. But not our witch. She fought. Then when that didn't get her free, she hollered rape. I had to give her neck a little squeeze.

She went out like a snuffed candle, and I tossed her over my shoulder to take to the monks' mill, like

the abbot said. When we got there, I tied one of her ankles to the millstone. Gave her plenty of leash, though, so's she could move around a bit once she came to. For thanks she called curses down on my head.

Aelfreda was fairhaired, middling tall, and maybe thirty years old. Younger than I expected and, ugly talk or no, a whole lot grander. Even in a rough peasant's cloak and mended tunic, she held herself as straight and proud as the dowager queen of England. Who might just have envied the way Aelfreda could make a man as tall as me feel like he was being looked down on.

But she sure didn't talk like any queen. In a raw squawk she said, "You're some kinda fool, know it? How long you think it's gonna be 'fore Lord Stanfeld busts me outa here?"

When I shrugged, her grey eyes raked across me like wind off the northern sea. "Stanfeld," she said, "or sump'n else."

"Uh-huh," said I.

"Don't believe it? Well, listen up."

She threw back her head and flung out her arms. "Come on, you elves," she cried. "Shoot him in the belly, turn him into jelly. Shoot him in the foot, turn him into soot."

Superstitious Sassenach! The English think the world's chock-full of wicked little elves. You can't see 'em, 'course. But they're around, don't you know, just waiting to put an arrow in your back, give you all kinds of devilish diseases.

"Shut up about your silly elves," I said. "Even if they exist—which I doubt—they're not near as bad as the Ellyllon like we got in Wales. El-

lyllon, now, they'll chew your bones and suck up your soul and swallow you down entire."

Aelfreda's lip curled in contempt for such foreign foolishness.

I said, "Anyways, elves can only jump Sassenachs."

Which is what I've always heard. Still, you never know, and I was glad for the charm pouch that hung around my neck. It contained lupine and bishopwort and a sliver of St. Veronica, all of 'em fine protection against elves. And whatever else might be roaming around just out of mortal sight.

"So I ain't much impressed by your big talk and your doll-baby magic," I said as I went to the millhouse door. "There's no Welshman would be."

But Aelfreda wasn't done yet. "I can call sump'n besides elves, you know. I can call down powers. Powers and principalities."

"Sure you can," I said, giving her the old Welsh counter. "Thing is, will they come?"

For awhile I didn't think the king's reeve would come, either. Took the man damn near a fortnight. Meantime, evil returned to Bracknel. Two days after I caught Aelfreda, the monks found a whole hare bled out right at the churchhouse door.

It sure wasn't Aelfreda's doing. Not unless she really could call down powers—or make herself invisible like witches always claim they can. But I figured there was a better explanation, one closer to hand.

I waited till that afternoon to see Abbot Hylltun, after he'd finished

exorcising the hare. Found him in the workyard behind the chapter house, sitting in a wicker chair and carving out new pens. Beside him was a small table littered with inkpots, parchment, trimmed goose quills. At his feet lay the black cat, asleep in the sun.

"Got a problem," I said.

"Indeed you do," he said. He picked up one of the quills and with a little knife set to paring its end into a nib. "So do we both. At least until Aelfreda is in her grave."

"It's about Aelfreda that I got the problem," I said.

The abbot cut a slit up the middle of the nib.

"This is what I'm thinking about the evil here at Bracknel," I said. "Item one: All the blood and guts, all the dead things, turn up *inside* the cloister. But the dolls were left at the gate, *outside* the cloister. Right?"

Abbot Hylltun nodded, and I went on. "Item two: There's been innards and stuff found any number of different times. But just two dolls, both of 'em recent."

The abbot pressed the nib against the tabletop and with a flick of his knife squared it off. He set knife and new pen aside. "Continue," he said.

"Item three: Think back to before I came—no innards, no image, nothing at all turned up when somebody was watching the gate and guarding the walls. In other words, once regular watches started, the nastiness stopped cold. For what, a whole month? Until—"

"Until Brother Boda found a clump of guts in the bell tower. That's when I sent for you."

"Didn't you tell me there was a

terrible storm the night before he found the guts? A storm bad enough to drive the guards inside?"

The abbot nodded.

"See where I'm headed? I think Aelfreda's witchiness ain't all that's going on here at Bracknel. Oh, she did the dolls. But like I said, they were both left outside the gate."

I stopped to take a good look at the abbot, see if he was with me. He was fingering his sharp little knife.

I said, "Aelfreda couldn't have got inside the walls, not with half the monastery watching. And once I got here, there were only dolls left—outside."

"Well, she certainly could have gotten in during that storm, when the guards were out of the way."

"But that was just the once, right?"

Abbot Hylltun's eyebrows shot up. "Are you trying to say something else is getting past our walls and bringing its evil to our doorstep?"

"Not necessarily getting *past* your walls," I said, "'cause it wasn't *something* left that hare by the church. It was *somebody*."

Whilst the abbot sat staring at me, I let my own gaze rove round the cloister yard, from the turnip patch to the latrine to the chapter house itself.

"By St. Benedict," he said. "You can't mean someone right inside the monastery is responsible for this evil."

"Think over what I been telling you. It has to be one of the brethren."

The little abbot leaped out of his chair and marched right up to me. "There is no Judas here," he hissed. "God's soldiers don't turn traitor."



Abbot Hylltun might not have been very big, but he could cast a cold eye with the best of 'em. And now he cast it on me.

"You, Welshman, are like as a lion that is greedy of his prey," he said, quoting the psalm. "It was you who killed that hare and left it at the church door."

"Me? What in hell for?"

"Because you aren't satisfied with what the monastery will pay you for Aelfreda. Don't think I didn't know all about you when I hired you. You are a thief—a relic thief, a man who steals from holy church. And now you're trying to squeeze money out of us with this false show of evil."

"Pretty good plan," I said. "Sure wish I'da thought of it. But I was guarding Aelfreda the night Brother Boda found that hare."

The abbot shot me another cold glower, then raised his face and his arms. "Here is the young lion lurking," he sang out. "Arise, O Lord, disappoint him, cast him down with thine own sword."

That, thought I, is the second time somebody's up and sicced the unseen on me. Maybe I'd better get out of here. Quick-like, too. Lest third time's the charm.

"I tell you, Welshman, once and for all," Abbot Hylltun said. "There is no traitor, there is no Judas at Bracknel."

He said it in his best pulpit tone. Then all of a sudden his eyebrows started twitching, and he stopped talking. Presently, in a voice so low it was barely a whisper, he said, "A redhaired man is ever a curse."

I wondered what he meant by that. I didn't have red hair. Judas Is-

cariot did, though. And Brother Boda, too.

In spite of Aelfreda's elf threats and what Abbot Hylltun told God about me, I didn't leave the monastery after all. The abbot decided he'd got it wrong—decided I wasn't the problem at Bracknel. We both knew it was Aelfreda, didn't we? She could pull all manner of devil-tricks, couldn't she? You'd accept a raise in your pay for staying on as her guard, wouldn't you? The logic of his argument persuaded me.

So who was the problem at Bracknel? Not Lord Stanfeld. He never came to rescue Aelfreda, never helped her out at all. Nor was the reason hard to find.

Seems the king's reeve stopped at Stanfeld Hall on his way to the monastery. Told Stanfeld that King Ethelred's Witan—his council of thanes and bishops—had heard about the trouble at Bracknel. Said they hoped it didn't have anything to do with Ethelred's plan to give King Wood to the monks. Said Stanfeld should go see the king in Winchester real soon, bring his property deeds with him. Ethelred wanted to review some boundary markers twixt his land and Stanfeld's.

When the king's reeve—his name was Wulfsige—and his men arrived at Bracknel, he let Abbot Hylltun know this trial wasn't the only one on his docket. Nor was it the most important. "So start ringing your bells right now," Wulfsige said. "The king's justice will be done tomorrow morning at the monastery gate."

By first light every peasant in the countryside—male and female,

young and old, lame and whole—stood at the gate. It was a raw day even for February, and the churls, wrapped in thin cloaks and blowing on cold fingers, could've made themselves busy inside. There was barley to be threshed and good ale to be brewed. But that was work, and it didn't have to be done on court day. Lucky, then, that thereabouts court day came but maybe once in a decade. More often and the ground would've gone unplowed, the chickens unplucked, the beans unpicked. The whole countryside would have happily starved, so much good fun was the king's justice show.

"Ooh" they went when the monastery gate opened and a monk brought out bench and chair. "Ah" they went when Wulfsige sat down behind the bench. Then came "Oh" as the monks gathered in the gateway and "Ha" for the abbot's cat as he leaped atop the wall. But when I brought Aelfreda from the millhouse, there was nary a sound at all.

I stationed her before the bench, close enough so Wulfsige could see her and she him—but not close enough so she could all of a sudden go for his eyes like she had with several guards several times. Just to make sure she didn't act up, I carried a shepherd's crook. Its business end was around her neck.

This was the first time Wulfsige had seen our witch, and he gave her a good studying. What he thought of her I couldn't say—he had one of those faces that never changes, not for love nor money neither. As for Aelfreda, she looked like she'd love to stick a nail right between his legs.

Wulfsige spoke to her in a voice

loud enough for everybody to hear. "This is the law concerning witchcraft and sorcery and secret acts of murder," he said. "If the accused cannot deny the charge, he—or she—is to forfeit his life."

Aelfreda said, also in a good big voice, "I never done it."

And she was no dummy to say that. In English law if you admit to a thing you're dead within the week. Strung up at a crossroads with the pipes playing and the crowd cheering. Deny it and you can be fooling with dolls till you're eighty.

So, under English law, once Aelfreda cried her innocence, it didn't matter that I had all but caught her in the act. Her kin, maybe even Stanfeld himself, would supply oath-helpers to swear she'd done nothing wrong. Then the Crown would bring in its own oath-helpers to swear just the opposite.

But the king's reeve was no dummy, either. Why waste everybody's time with a case sure to end in a draw? "It appears," he said, "that we are unlikely to reach a true judgment. As a result, and according to the law, the defendant will undergo the three-fold ordeal."

The crowd heaved a happy "Ahhh." Here came the real fun.

See you, the three-fold ordeal's the endmost step in the legal process, the one that offers up God's own proof in the matter. It'd go this way: First, Aelfreda'd have to stick her arm in boiling water. Then, if she were innocent enough not to blister, she'd move on to picking up three pounds of red-hot iron and carrying it for nine feet.

If she still didn't blister, the only

thing left was to get dunked. They'd put a rope around her middle and throw her into deep water. If she sank, it meant the water accepted her and she was innocent. If she floated up, the water had rejected her. Her guilt was proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

"However," Wulfsige said, "in the interest of an expeditious proceeding, I will permit the defendant to waive the ordeal's initial phases."

At the bottom of that load of Latin was a real surprise—Aelfreda didn't have to risk cooking an arm or roasting her hands. She only had to do the ordeal by water. Which might seem like she was getting off easy, except women witches always come floating up.

Aelfreda must've known so, too. When the reeve said she'd be put to the water test, she lost her calm at last. She let out a squeal, and her face went all mottled and green. But her legs stayed under her, and by the time Wulfsige's men led her down to the millpond, she moved with the bold grandeur of a queen going to her coronation.

The crowd tumbled after her, churls, monks, me—and now a man mounted on a bay horse. Lord Stanfeld had come after all.

He was dark for an Englishman, with wild black hair and eyes like hot tar. At the pond he sat scowling atop his horse whilst the churls, his own and others, came up to him and bowed and scraped and knuckled their forelocks. The monks acted like he wasn't there. They moved to the far side of the pond, faces hid deep inside their black hoods.

Nor did Aelfreda make any sign

that she saw Stanfeld, just stood quiet on the muddy mill path whilst Wulfsige's men wound her up in a rope, neck to knee to ankle. When they were done, she asked if she could kiss St. John's shinbone. It belonged to the monastery and was one of the holiest relics in all England.

Since the law said defendants could swear on a relic if they wanted, Wulfsige told Abbot Hylltun to have it brought down from the churchhouse. The abbot told Wulfsige he didn't care what the law said, no witch was coming anyplace close to John's sainted shin. After that I heard only a couple more words—wood was one, I think, and king—until the abbot all of a sudden ordered Prior Cole to go and fetch St. John.

I don't know if Aelfreda blasphemed by swearing her innocence over the relic like folks claimed she did. All I heard was Wulfsige command his men to toss her in the pond. She hit the water with a hard plunk.

An Arab leech I knew down in Sicily once told me there's no woman in the world won't bob right back up when she's dropped in a pond. Said it's because women are empty vessels. A man'll go straight to the bottom, so weighty is his soul.

But Aelfreda, alone of all her kind, must've been soul to the brim. When Wulfsige's men heaved her in the water, she sank like a rock. And to further prove her case, she stayed sunk.

Everybody stood staring as the water of the pond grew still. Until finally Lord Stanfeld drew his sword

and said in a loud voice, "God's judgment has been rendered. Set the woman free."

Wulfsige shrugged and signaled to his men. They hauled her up.

The churls went wild. And why not? They'd seen a thing so wondrous rare they'd be talking about it into the millennium. Meantime they leaped and danced and crowed and cried. One or two even fell in the millpond themselves. Then they wrapped Aelfreda in a thick wool blanket and chaired her home like she was Judith with the head of Holofernes in her hands.

"Congratulations!" I yelled as she went by, and gave her a big thumbs up. In reply she gave me a regal nod and the finger.

What passed amongst Stanfeld and Wulfsige and Abbot Hylltun, I don't know. But none of 'em looked very pleased as they spoke each to the other. Presently Stanfeld rode in one direction and Wulfsige another, with the abbot casting a cold eye after both.

It was time for me to be off, too. And time to collect my pay. I had brought in the local witch, after all, just as I was hired to do. So, whilst abbot and prior were still at the millpond with the rest of the monks—shaking their heads and clucking and tch-tching and saying how shocked they were at the way things had turned out—I went to wait in the abbot's lodge.

Its door hung open a crack, and when I stepped inside, my foot crunched down on a sparrow head. Nor was that all. Around the empty cloister I found a gutted newt on

the chapter house step and, in the kitchen, two mutilated mice.

So, thought I, the millpond gave true justice. Just like I figured, Aelfreda never did the dirty at Bracknel.

Trouble was, anybody else could have. Well, maybe not the abbot. Not today, anyhow. I'd had him in view for the entire afternoon, standing right beside Wulfsige, handing him St. John.

But Prior Cole had gone to fetch the relic—and taken his sweet time doing it, too. He could've planted the wicked things then. Or any other time for that matter: Abbot Hylltun wasn't the only one with a private cell and felt night shoes. As for why—well, Cole didn't like the abbot, maybe even had an eye to taking his place. Which might just happen if he could make Hylltun look bad enough to the other monks.

But maybe someone else had the same idea. Brother Boda had made it pretty clear he'd be happy to see the last of abbot and prior. On top of that, he was known to wander around at night, and today I sure hadn't taken a count of the black hoods down at the millpond.

Then there was Stanfeld. He'd still be smarting under those threats by the king's reeve, maybe hurting enough that he'd want to show the monks their problems weren't over yet. Besides that, he'd come to the trial late. He could've easily snuck into the empty monastery whilst everybody else was at the millpond.

The notion of the monastery's being empty made me think back to the morning—when the abbot'd had to push his way through all the

monks standing in the monastery gateway. Did he linger in the cloister so he could set out the dead stuff? He could've, that was for sure. But why on earth would he want to?

Well, thought I, it ain't my problem. And to be sure nobody tried to make it so, I got a shovel, scooped up the newt and the mice and the sparrow head, then dumped 'em down the latrine. I figured I'd be long gone before there'd be any more around.

I was wrong again. Back in the abbot's lodge a headless rat, still warm and twitching, lay on the oak table.

This time, though, I saw who left it there.

He made a bolt for the door. But I was closer and slammed it shut. Not a smart move. Now I stood in the dark with a killer who could stalk his prey even at night. And besides that, he was armed to the teeth.

I stripped off my cloak and twisted it around my arm and hand as protection against his sharp weapons. Then, summoning up all my courage, I advanced toward the corner where he lay in wait.

He was even bigger than I remembered, his eyes greener as they narrowed down in his bloodstained face. "Give it up, brother," I said, "you know you ain't got a whisker of a chance, not in this little bitty room."

With a snarl, he lunged for me. With a grunt, I grabbed at him.

Missed, both of us, and the chase began.

Wall to wall we went, corner to corner. Down came the abbot's bookcase, over fell his chair. We swung from the rafters, we skittered on the floor. We dashed and darted, leaped and bounded and sprang.

Then he shot across the oak table, me right behind. Only, he landed on his feet but I hit square on my nose. I heard the crunch, felt the pain, tasted the blood.

I stood up and faced him. "That's it, you son of Satan," I hissed.

Then I pounced.

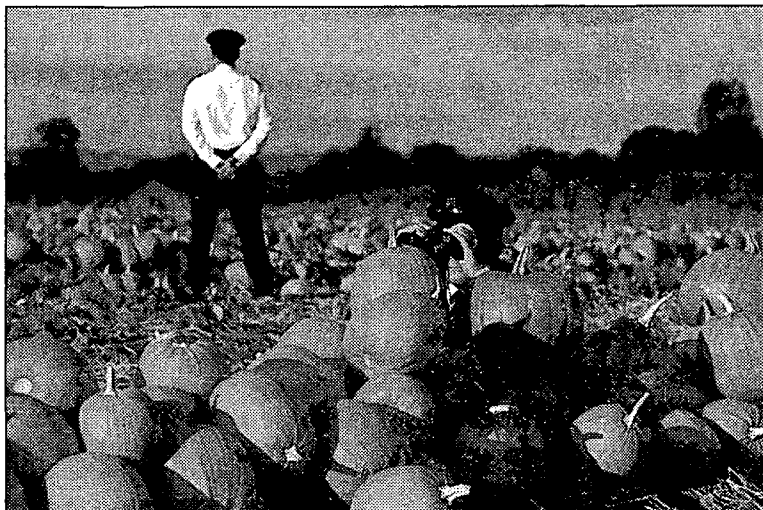
Snatched him up by his black tail and gave it a hard twist. You bet he clawed me. Bit me, too. But he calmed down quick enough once I had him wound tight in my cloak. Cats are way too smart to fight to the death.

And so am I. That's why, when the abbot refused to pay up, I didn't fight about it. Didn't turn a hair when he claimed I hadn't caught a witch. Kept nice and quiet when he said, "After all, Aelfreda was found innocent of the charge. And as for my cat being some kind of witch, now really—"

I didn't fight him at all, just went and said a prayer in the church-house. Then I got on my horse and headed home.

But, see you, there's more than one way to skin a cat. Safely at rest in my saddlebag lay the shinbone of St. John.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Agence France-Presse/Robyn Mayes*

Peter won't get anywhere near here. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



FICTION

# RUNAWAYS TRACED

S. L. Franklin



*Illustration by Tim Foley*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/00*

I guess twenty-eight years is long enough to keep something bottled up, even the Sumner business, which I've never told anyone much about except my wife Ginny. I've got to admit that the case was important for me at the time: it was the only case I had in my B.G. career—Before Ginny—that wasn't pretty ordinary, and it was also the case that put me on the map as a detective after five pretty lean, depressing years. Other than that, though, there's not too much positive to say about it, and that's probably why I've kept it buried all this time.

It began on a morning in late August of 1972. I didn't have anything going right then, so I was hanging around my office feeling old and tired and jaded although, looking back now, I seem to have been impossibly young and innocent at that time, not to mention energetic. It was the peak of the great sideburns-and-bellbottoms scare that summer—just to add a small sartorial note—but I'd managed to avoid both by not being able to afford any new clothes for a couple of years and by going to the kind of barbershop where hair tonic was still called "elephant sweat," and if you had to wait for a while, your choice of reading material was either *Argosy* or *Field and Stream*.

Anyway, I was killing time in the office that morning like the poor, sad mope I probably was when the telephone rang and I answered it. "Carr Investigations and Security."

"Mr. Carr, please," said a woman's voice.

"Speaking."

"Ah! Mr. Carr, I'm interested in

hiring you to perform a service—a detective service, of course—but I would prefer to discuss it here rather than at your office. Can that be managed?"

The voice was in a pleasant middle range, slightly smoky, and it had a tone of easy self-assurance. Not the type of voice my clients normally had at that time, male or female.

"Sure," I said. "Where is 'here' from here?"

"Lakepoint Heights. The address is 224 Sheridan Place. Could you be here at two this afternoon?"

"Sure," I said again. "White tie or casual?"

"I haven't seen a white tie in at least five years," she replied after a pause. "Tie-dyed is more the style."

"Not for me," I said. "For whom should I ask?"

"Mrs. Julia Emerson."

"And that's you?"

"Yes—of course."

"I'll be there at two, Mrs. Emerson."

If you know Lakepoint Heights, you know that Sheridan Place is about one notch below lakefront mansion status. From the outside the house at 224 was large and homey looking rather than flashy, but inside I discovered that it had been remodeled and redecorated from a different point of view. The maid who answered the door led me back to a room with a long, low ceiling; its most arresting feature—I can still see it in memory—was a floor of some kind of reddish wood with such a high gloss that it made you half afraid to take a step for fear of causing permanent damage. A few small rugs were scattered about,

mostly in front of pieces of rather formal, traditional furniture, and at the opposite end a large stone fireplace was flanked by ornate carved cabinets displaying the kind of china, pottery, and figurines you see in the better museums. All in all I had the feeling that it wasn't the sort of room the tie-dyed crowd could ever feel comfortable in. I didn't feel comfortable in it, either.

A woman standing by a liquor cabinet turned when I entered and watched me approach for a moment. I was dressed in a black blazer and gray slacks, so that part was all right, but the thick glasses and facial birthmark had their fairly predictable effect. She looked away from my face and said, "Are you . . . Mr. Carr?"

"Right," I said. "Are you . . . Mrs. Emerson?"

"I am. Would you care for a drink?"

"Nothing alcoholic, thanks. A Coke or 7-Up would be fine if you have it."

I was close enough by that time to see a look of amusement cross her face. "Then you're not the detective I expected, Mr. Carr."

"I seldom am," I replied—not clever, just quick. "But if you don't like me, you know, there's always the yellow pages."

"But that's how I found *you*," she said, making a comic gesture of resignation with her hands. She turned back to the liquor cabinet and poured a healthy belt of whisky over some ice in a glass; then she dropped ice into another glass with a pair of tongs and crouched for a second to reach a bottle of 7-Up in

the back of the cabinet. She was around forty, I decided, and not particularly noteworthy in her physical appearance. Medium height, medium build, medium brown hair. Her face wasn't a particularly nice face although it was superficially attractive, I suppose, in the sort of hard, high-living style. It had a look of self-satisfaction about it that was consistent, at least, with her self-assured tone of voice. She wore an expensive-looking sleeveless pantsuit, as I recall, in two tones of beige. The pants, of course, were bellbottoms. What else?

When we got seated finally, she lit a cigarette after another amused reaction to the fact that I didn't smoke. Then she said, "Let's be frank, shall we?"

I remember making a noncommittal gesture. I had the situation pegged, actually, as a divorce case—which I was still taking at that time because I needed any income I could get my hands on.

"About a year ago," she said, "my daughters ran away from home."

"Oh," I said, feeling slightly relieved, I suppose. She spoke so matter of factly, though, that it took me a second to decipher what she really meant. "And they're still missing, I assume?"

"Yes—the tiresome brats. We've kept it quiet and let the police try to find them. But—after a year . . ."

"And you picked me out of the phone book to do a missing persons search?"

"Why not? Your advertisement was the only one that mentioned runaways. Missing persons located. Runaways traced."

I thought about it and then about her and about several remarks that seemed appropriate but rude; then I said, "Okay. Tell me the whole story. Start at the beginning."

"Ah. Then we *are* being frank," she said, sounding amused again. She leaned back in an overstuffed chair, holding her glass in one hand and her cigarette in the other. "The girls were conceived more than three months before my first marriage. Is that a frank enough beginning? They're twins—fraternal, not identical. I've never cared for them terribly, although they were very cute when they were around three or four. My first husband and I separated when they were five and divorced when they were seven. If I told you that I suffered in penury to raise them respectably, I'd be lying. I've been financially independent since that same day, and I have lived in this house the entire seventeen years since."

"Then the girls ran away when they were sixteen?" I asked.

"Not quite. Their birthday is September twelfth."

She puffed at her cigarette before she continued. "I'll try to forestall some of your questions. No, they didn't leave a letter explaining why they were being so stupid. Yes, they did write once. Chief Crabbe has the note. Why did they go? We weren't getting along just then, I suppose, and I was remarrying. When did they go? While Tom and I were honeymooning. They told the housekeeper I had at the time that they were off to spend a couple of days with some friends of theirs who live on Lakewood Drive. They took along

all the money in their bank accounts, which was over two thousand dollars. What am I forgetting?"

"Their names," I said. "Appearance. Dress when last seen. Progress, if any, made by the police. Where the note was mailed from. Those'll do, to start."

"Goodness," she said, holding her glass out. "I'll need fortification for that. Can you be trusted to pour me another drink?"

"Sure," I said. I took the glass to the liquor cabinet and sloshed in about the same amount of booze as she had started with. When I handed it to her, she said, "You know, from a rear angle, you're quite a specimen. How tall are you?"

"Tall enough to know better," I said. "Six five. And it's a birthmark, not a burn. Also, the glasses aren't Coke-bottle bottoms in spite of the fact that I like the product. Do you really care about your daughters at all, Mrs. Emerson?"

She laughed with an air of rather wicked delight. "Now, that's more what I was expecting from a private eye—insolence."

I didn't rise to the bait. I just sat down and waited.

After a pull at her cigarette, she said in a serious tone, "I care about them enough to try to find them and bring them back."

I thought about the profiles I'd studied on runaway teenage girls. The reasons they ran away were pretty grim a lot of the time—drugs, beatings, pregnancy, neglect. Sexual abuse either wasn't so prevalent back then or it didn't make as big a splash in the studies as it does today. Of course, in the late sixties

and early seventies a lot of run-aways thought they were rejecting the establishment in some way and were dropping out of society. I asked her, "Are they the sort of kids who might take off for San Francisco or a commune?"

"Hippies?" she said skeptically. "Cindy and Sandy? I rather think not. They're more likely to be ski bunnies. Let me answer some more of your questions. Their names are Cynthia and Sandra Sumner, for one thing, not Emerson. Cindy is very cute. She has curly reddish hair and blue eyes. Sandy is, or was, somewhat overweight, nothing grotesque. God knows what she might be now. She has very shiny straight brown hair, light but not blonde. Brown eyes. They're both a little taller than I. They look like sisters."

"Do you have pictures?"

"Chief Crabbe has the best one. You can get it from him."

I thought for a moment. She sipped at her drink, watching me.

"You said they mailed a note to you. Tell me about it," I said.

"It said something like 'Mother dear, dear Mother, having a great time. Don't worry your head off. See you in 1984.' They both signed it."

"Where was it mailed from?"

"Denver, Colorado."

"When?"

"Their birthday."

"September twelfth—last year," I said. "Nothing since?"

"No. They love Colorado. We went skiing every year on their spring break from school."

"Not an easy place to spend the winter without money, though," I said.

"Oh, there's plenty of seasonal employment. But the Colorado law enforcement people couldn't find them. Tom and I spent a week going to some of the resorts with a state trooper. It was impossible—we gave up and went skiing instead."

"So you're saying the police haven't had any luck."

"None. I said they were brats. They've changed their names and dyed their hair—I wouldn't put it past them—and they think they're being very naughty and daring. And trying."

"Mrs. Emerson," I said. "You realize, don't you, that runaway teenage girls—" I had to decide how to say it—"end up on the street, you know, a lot of the time. That's why they're so hard to find. And that's why there's no record of employment."

She shook her head. "You don't know my daughters, Mr. Carr. As soon as it stops being fun, they'll call and ask me to send them the air-fare home." She sounded as if she believed what she said, so I didn't try to argue with her.

I said, "What about their father? I know he's been out of the picture for awhile, but—has he stayed in contact with you and the girls?"

"Here we are—back to frankness," she replied. "Philip Sumner, Mr. Carr, was a total failure as a husband, and he's just as lousy as a father. When the police asked him about the girls last August, he phoned me while they were still there and accused me of making the whole situation up."

"Does he pay child support?"

She laughed. "What convention-

al ideas you have. He doesn't. It wasn't thought necessary, since I am, as they say, a wealthy woman in my own right. I hope you'll go see Philip, though. In fact, I insist."

"I haven't said I'll take the job," I said, "so don't get ahead of yourself."

"Oh, you will," she said in her most self-satisfied tone. "You're hooked on Cindy and Sandy already, I can tell, and you're dying to see Colorado this time of year."

Well. She was right about my being hooked on the girls at least. So I took on the job at eighty dollars a day plus expenses, which was a pretty high rate in 1972. She gave me five hundred dollars to start—in cash, which is always good—and after a few more questions on my part, the interview ended with her leading me out to the front porch, where she made disparaging remarks about the car I was driving—then, a Buick Skylark that my father had bought new a few months before he died in 1965.

As I was backing down the drive, a man stepped out on the porch and started talking with her. He looked around her age, maybe five ten, slight build, and from the way he put his arm around her shoulders I concluded he was her second husband, Tom Emerson. I wondered a little why he hadn't joined in the interview, but the easy answer was that it didn't particularly interest him—they weren't his daughters. Or possibly, given the timing and circumstances of their disappearance, maybe he was as hostile to them as they appeared to be to him. Who knew? I didn't, so I put it out of my mind for the time being.

Five minutes later I was nursing the old Skylark into a diagonal space directly across Main Street from the Lakepoint Heights municipal building, which means, of course, that I was parking right in front of Robb's Produce Market. If I had known then what I do now, I would have popped in and said hello to my future in-laws. As it was, I didn't even notice. If a mysterious stranger on the street had stepped up just then and said, "In less than two years' time you will meet and marry Ginny Robb, the beautiful black-haired daughter of the owners of that market," I would have said, "Sorry, friend, you've got the wrong man." Which goes to show, I guess, how little we ever really know about what's in store for us.

I trotted across the street and went down the stairs to the police department. "Is Chief Crabbe in?" I asked the uniformed cop behind the counter.

"Acting chief," the cop remarked. "He's in. What's your problem?" Even in Lakepoint Heights the cops have to act hard, I guess.

"An over-curious policeman. If he's not too busy, tell him Mrs. Emerson sent me about her daughters."

"Oh," he said. "Her. You got a name?"

I gave him a card, and he took it into Crabbe's office. A minute later I was shown inside.

As I think back on it now, considering that we ended up working together pretty well on two different cases, Crabbe's response to my appearance that afternoon was definitely a false start.



"Just who the hell are you?" he asked as soon as we were alone in the office. He was only about thirty-five, and with that sort of happy-go-lucky, youthful face of his, it was hard not to crack a smile at this attempt at intimidation, especially since I had him by seven or eight inches and forty pounds or so. Plus the fact that he didn't look to be exactly in fighting trim.

"R. J. Carr," I said. "Mrs. Emerson hired me this afternoon to try to track down her daughters."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Their birthday's coming up. Maybe she had a new pang of guilt."

"I've worked that case!" he said. "Dog-gone it! Every law enforcement agency in the state of Colorado hates my guts because I rode their backs so hard. The amount of taxpayer dollars I've spent on long-distance calls may get me demoted. So she goes out and hires you without one word of explanation to *me*, does she? I'd have told her to do it different, frankly."

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't solicit her interest, though. She called me."

After a pause he said, "Okay. All right. I can live with it. Who are you, though? Did someone recommend you?"

I shook my head. "What she told me was that she picked me out of the yellow pages because my ad says I handle runaways." I shrugged. "I don't like it either, but people with troubles don't always act rationally. As for me, I've been in business for five years, I've got a degree in criminology from Southern and a master's from U. of C., and I would-

n't be a private eye if I could pass any department's vision test. If you want a reference, call Arnie Tate at Homicide Central in Chicago."

He shook his head. "No." Then he grinned a sort of rueful grin. "No, it's just my pride that's hurt. You sound okay. I don't mind if you take a look at the file." He got up from his chair.

"Hold the file a minute," I said. "Answer a couple of questions for me instead."

He stopped to look at his watch, then remarked, "You know, I usually take a break about this time in the afternoon. Buy me a cup of coffee and I'll answer any question I can—except where that pair of girls have gotten to."

He led me out of the building and over to a glorified diner that called itself The Tea Room, where we got some coffee for him and a diet cola for me and a booth in the back. "If I'm going to be indiscreet," he said, "I'd rather do it off the premises where it's deniable. I'd swear that office is bugged, sometimes."

"Your desk man stressed that you were the *acting* chief."

"He's another one. I don't want to go into it. Ask me a question."

I said, "Okay. What's the real story on that family? Mrs. Emerson was a little sketchy."

"She would be. You know the girls are from her first marriage?"

I nodded.

"Well, she and this Emerson had evidently been having an affair for quite a while when *his* wife filed for divorce in a pretty noisy way and named her in the suit. That was a couple of years ago. Maybe three."

"Okay," I said. "That fills in the motivation a little bit."

"I've also got a theory that the girls were teased a lot in high school the previous year—the case was pretty notorious in the local press—so there was pressure to leave from that direction, too, before school started again."

"Somehow, though," I said, "I get the feeling that the girls are either pretty immature or not too bright."

"Getting information about that pair is like pulling teeth. This is Lakepoint Heights, for one thing, where everything is bright and beautiful—only don't quote me. The school system won't pass along anything in the way of psychological data, and I could never get a serious answer out of Mrs. Emerson. I finally talked one of their junior high teachers into giving me an impression off the record. What this woman told me was that when the girls were in her class they were both pretty smart but a little off base—'off the wall' she said."

"Not immature so much as unstable, maybe," I remarked.

"Or just a pair of screwballs."

"Like their mother? I don't know," I said. "I'm still not getting the profile of a pair of runaway sisters. Tell me about Tom Emerson."

"What about him? And why?"

"Humor me," I said. "You pick up on these people through osmosis. I'm a stranger in town."

"Sure," he said. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and offered them to me. I shook my head. "I'm trying to quit," he said before lighting up. "What's your name again?"

"R. J.," I told him. "You can call me Ray if it bothers you."

"Fine. My name's Bill. Emerson's a professor of something or other down at Northwestern. He's about eight or ten years older than his current wife although he doesn't look it. He and his former wife had a house near the country club, nothing fancy by local standards. There's a rumor I won't repeat about Tom and Julia scoring on the eighteenth green, on more than one occasion, actually, and since I don't understand professors any more than I do rich people, I'm probably doomed in this job. I don't mind her, to tell the truth, but he gives me the creeps and I am a high school grad-u-ate. Next question."

"Did he give the girls the creeps?"

Crabbe sat silently for a moment before he answered, "I hadn't thought about it at all, actually, but I'd say no. Nothing points that way."

"Okay," I said. "Then what about the father, this Philip Sumner? Were you the one who questioned him?"

"Uh-huh." He cleared his throat. "Philip Sumner is an author of some kind—the kind, I guess, who remind you of it every few minutes so you won't forget. All these people are so goddamned independently wealthy, Ray, that they make you wonder what the fuss is about. Sumner has an apartment down near Lincoln Park—on two floors—that's not too much larger than the village hall. He has not remarried. I could be wrong, but I'd say his interests may have taken a turn in a different direction since he got divorced. Or he

might just be one of those effete snobs Spiro Agnew talks about. His concern for his daughters was more than I expected, actually, considering what Mrs. Emerson had told us about him, although at first he thought it was just some kind of prank. There's still a lot of hostility there toward her—that's my analysis based on roughly half an hour in the man's presence."

We walked back to Crabbe's office, and after I looked through the file on the case for about fifteen minutes, I came to the conclusion, which I decided to keep private, that the one place the girls were not going to be found was Colorado. The photo Crabbe had showed them in ski outfits with a background of snow and evergreens, grinning at the camera. Both had hair well down over their shoulders. The redhead, to me, wasn't that cute, and the brunette didn't look overweight, just chunkier than her sister, but women judge those things differently.

The note the girls had sent on their birthday read word for word as Mrs. Emerson remembered it. It appeared to be in the handwriting of Sandy, the brunette, except for Cindy's signature. I asked to have the picture and the note on loan; then Crabbe and I shook hands, and I headed back to the city.

I had a strange sensation as I drove in to catch the expressway. I felt for the first time in my life that I had a case that might actually have some meat on its bones. It was an interesting feeling that first time, and a little exciting in a way. But now, when I get it, I know better. If

I've learned only one thing in this business, it's that when a case starts to look interesting, that usually means I'm about to uncover some kind of nastiness. . . .

**B**efore I knocked off that evening, I made a call to the residence of Philip Sumner to try to make an appointment with him the following day. I got someone with a strangely modulated voice on the line who told me that Sumner was out. I explained my reason for calling, and when I was asked to hold, I held. When the person came back on the line, it was to identify himself as Sumner's research assistant George. George said he'd checked Sumner's schedule and my choices were nine thirty or three thirty. I took nine thirty and hung up, wondering a little about George, I admit, because of Crabbe's comment.

The next morning at nine twenty-nine I was examined by the doorman at the building where Sumner lived, found to be ugly and ill-clothed but neat, and sent by elevator to the fifth floor. The door to Sumner's apartment was opened by the inevitable maid in a uniform and cap. This one had a feather duster in one hand, and without waiting for an explanation she said, "Follow me, please."

She marched through two large, expensively decorated rooms with strange, original art on the walls and then motioned me through a doorway into a third room that could only be Philip Sumner's study. I stopped just inside and looked around. Bright sunlight was an-

gling down from a couple of high, narrow windows, but otherwise the walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. An ornate Oriental rug covered the floor, and the room seemed cluttered with furniture—a large carved desk with a heavily padded chair behind it, a small writing desk and chair, a worktable, a sofa, a couple of side chairs. In one of the side chairs lounged a young man in his early twenties, I guessed, with his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. He was rather small and stocky—five seven and one sixty or so—with round-rimmed spectacles, a little, neat mustache, and blond hair in the longish style of the early seventies. No sideburns, but the slacks of his modish, double-breasted suit were . . . bellbottoms.

He uncrossed his legs and stood, looking up at me with a smirking, knowing expression on what turned out to be a somewhat adolescent face seen head-on. "Mr. Carr?" he said in the modulated voice I'd heard on the phone.

"Of course he's Mr. Carr," said Philip Sumner, who stood beside the chair behind the large desk. "Don't pose, George. It doesn't suit you. You may close the door behind you as you leave."

George turned to look at him uncertainly. "But you said I could stay."

"I've changed my mind." Sumner motioned toward the door with his head.

"All right," George said in an unwilling tone. "I find the fact that you have daughters . . . interesting, that's all." He gave me a sidelong glance, then walked around me and out of the room.

Sumner stood, his arms crossed, examining me, until he was satisfied, I guess, that George wasn't coming back. He was a fairly large man with an ungainly body. He also wore longish hair and a modish suit, gray, with a red-checked shirt and a black tie. They looked ridiculous on him, but short of calling the fashion police, there was nothing I could do. "Have a seat, Mr. Carr," he said. "And be brief. I'm a writer, and I'm working against my editor's deadline."

I took the chair George had vacated and waited for him to get comfortable behind the desk. "As I told your assistant on the phone," I said, "your ex-wife has hired me to look for your daughters. She apparently thinks the official law enforcement channels aren't doing the job."

"Go on," he said.

"I've seen the police file on the case, so I know what you told them a year ago. But I have some additional questions that they didn't ask. The first, of course, is have you seen or heard from the girls in the past year? Or anything about them?"

"No. On all counts," he said. He took a cigarette from an ornate box and fitted it into a carved holder. He was like a character in a grade-B movie, I decided, and he knew it and was playing it up.

I said, "Tell me about your marriage."

"Ah," he replied, raising his eyebrows. "But that was in another country. And besides, the wench is dead."

"Which wench was that?" I remarked, just to pass the time.

"You're not literary—are you, Mr. Carr?"

"I'm leaving that part of the conversation to you," I said. "If you don't want to answer, though, a plain no would be fine."

He lit the cigarette with a match. "Julia said nothing about it? Our marriage?"

"She was informative but mostly in the wrong places. I'm not trying to pry, Mr. Sumner. I'm just trying to get a little better picture of the background the girls left. I doubt that taking a magnifying glass to the ski slopes of Aspen at this late date is going to get me anywhere."

"Yes," he said. "I think you're right in that." He shifted in his chair. "I don't know what Julia has told you, but I suspect that she failed to say that ours was a marriage of convenience to a degree—or I should say a marriage based on mutual opportunism." He paused with a questioning look on his face.

"No," I said.

"Julia was the favored only granddaughter of Lydia Quincy Parks. She was heir to well over two million dollars held in trust until her wedding day or her thirtieth birthday, whichever came first. When she graduated from college, she found herself without a beau and eight more years to wait for the money unless she found one sooner. Her parents were well off enough, of course, but . . .

"I, on the other hand, was not seduced by wealth but bribed and coerced. My father held the purse-strings, and he wanted to see me married before he died. Parents can impose terrible things on children.

I wanted to please him. He was not in good health. The large prospective wedding gift was a strong enticement." He puffed at his cigarette. "Julia and I had been in the same set in high school, but we didn't meet again until the winter of 1954, a few months after her graduation and my discharge from the service. I'm a year older than she, in case you're wondering, and I initially found her very amusing. She—as I've already told you—had her eye out for a prospective husband, although not for the usual reasons, and at the time we seemed compatible enough, and Julia, God knows, was frank enough, so in the end we . . . struck a bargain. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah," I said.

"In both our families, of course, certain proprieties had to be observed—a period of engagement, an elaborate wedding—and we weren't quite such heartless buccaneers as the story sounds in outline. We liked each other—at the time."

"But things went sour after the marriage?" I said.

"Hm. Yes. We weren't . . . compatible, after all. Julia had to have her way, and, in spite of the twins, her way was parties and drinking and outdoor sports. I . . . am a literary chap. I prefer wine with dinner to cocktails on the verandah at four, darling, and skiing is my idea of torture in the colder regions of hell."

"And the girls?"

"I believe, Mr. Carr, that until we separated, I was fonder of the girls than she. That fondness is still a warm memory to me. But I served

no real purpose to them. After the divorce I traveled extensively for several years and..." He shrugged. "They've forgotten those times, and so I'm almost a stranger to them, who forces himself into their lives and bores them for a few hours every six or eight months out of a misbegotten sense of propriety."

The tone of self-pity in his voice seemed rather calculated to me. I ignored it. "So," I said, "what you're telling me is that you know nothing at all of what your daughters' lives have been like at home."

"Yes," he said. He straightened up in the chair and cleared his throat. "But knowing Julia, I would judge that she spoiled them with money and privileges and otherwise rather neglected and ignored them." He gave me a guardedly calculated look. "Except when they crossed her path, of course, and then—" He slapped his open hand on the desk top.

"Physical brutality?"

"I... wouldn't put it past her. They did run away." He looked off toward the windows. "I don't see that this mode of speculation can help you, Mr.—"

"Carr," I said.

"Yes. I'm bad with names."

"What about Tom Emerson?" I asked.

"Ah, now that is a name I do know. Thomas Alva Emerson, so christened, no doubt, to memorialize a pair of second-rate American minds, with himself to make the third."

And with you along, I thought to myself, there could be a hand of bridge.

Sumner looked at me critically. "Perhaps my reference was too learned. I meant, of course—"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Ralph Waldo Edison. Us nonliterary chaps can be a little slow, but we *have* been to grade school. Give us your deep thoughts on Emerson, the husband. Or do you actually know the guy?"

He stood up.

"You may leave at any time, Mr. Carr," he said. "I didn't submit to this interview to be insulted."

"I didn't either," I said, not moving. "You know, Mr. Sumner, if I had a pair of daughters—even in your circumstances, where you don't see them very much or know them very well—I'd at least make a little bigger show of concern than you have about trying to find them when they've been missing for over a year. Don't you care about them any more?"

I can still see him after all this time, standing behind the desk, leaning slightly backward, with a hard, hateful expression on his face. "Mr. Carr," he said, controlling his voice, "I will make clear to you, in confidence, something that Julia obviously has not. I am no relation whatsoever to Cindy and Sandy. Julia Parks and I did not share a bed until our wedding night, which was advanced from June to April in order to lessen the scandal surrounding a pregnant bride. I will not retail again the dynamics of the reason I went through with marrying Julia in this circumstance, but having been cuckolded in advance, I fear I was destined not to be a husband of distinction or the ever-dotting father of some other man's off-



spring. I did grow fond of the girls—I walked the floor with them as tiny babes. They hugged me and called me Daddy, and I almost loved them for a time. That time is past. I do not wish them ill, but I will not pretend more concern than I feel. And now I must insist that you go.”

“Do Cindy and Sandy regard you as their father?” I asked before standing up.

“As of the last time I saw them, yes. Julia has spared them that particular trauma. The door, sir, is behind you.”

Well—I could probably have badgered a few more bits and pieces out of Sumner, but I decided not to press it. I might need him again, and there was no point in pushing his hostility to me completely over the edge.

On my way out I hunted up George, the research assistant, who was off in another room talking to the maid. She stood in the open doorway of a closet lined with cleaning paraphernalia as I came in view, posed in the act of lighting a cigarette, and when she glanced up and saw me, she directed the young man’s attention my way. I stopped and waited for him to stroll across the room with his hands in his coat pockets, then I said, “I forgot to give your boss my card. We . . . didn’t have the friendliest conversation, I guess, but if you could just tell him that if anything comes up, the important thing is to get on the track of his daughters.”

He took the card from me and examined it briefly, then put his hands back in his pockets. “Is there a special time to call?” he asked, looking at me sideways again.

“He can leave a message from nine to five,” I said. “That’s during the week. I’m not there much, but most days I go by the office around five to check things out. If he really needs to get me directly, that’s the time to try.”

“I’ll tell him.” He started to say something else, stopped, then did say, “He doesn’t like it that I’m interested in his daughters.” He gazed across the room for a second toward the study. “But could you tell me—are you making any progress?”

“It’s my first day,” I said. “This is my first stop. And all the policemen in the state of Colorado have spent a year on the trail of that pair without any success.”

“Colorado? Why?” His eyes grew round behind the round lenses.

“That’s the question I ask myself. About a year ago the girls sent a note to their mother from Denver.”

“Then you think . . .”

“You can travel a long way from Denver in a year’s time.”

“Oh, definitely,” he said. “I see. I’ll give Philip your card, Mr. Carr. Good luck.” He passed by me toward Sumner’s study, then turned back. “You will let him know, won’t you? If you find something?”

“Sure,” I said.

“He’s . . . sensitive,” the young man said.

“Yeah, well, we all are,” I remarked.

I got back to the office about eleven fifteen, having decided that since it was Friday and the case was one that didn’t seem to require weekend work I’d fill in the rest of the day by checking out the vice scene right at home in Chicago, where, in

spite of all the arrows pointing at Colorado, there was a decent chance that the Sumner girls had returned and were hiding out. And the reason I was checking out the vice scene first was simply that what happens to long-term runaways an awful lot of the time, especially young girls, is that they end up becoming prostitutes. Not a pretty picture, but a true one.

It really doesn't matter how off-the-wall their personalities are, or how wealthy their background is. Runaways do stupid things and keep bad company and run out of money, and most of the time they don't have a good idea of what life is really like—what it takes in terms of effort or financing or commitment. They get scared and lonely, and they're easy prey for pimps. The psychology of it doesn't sound logical, I know, but that's how it works a lot of the time.

So I called the police department's Vice Unit, explained what I was looking for, and asked if I could come by there that afternoon. What I was looking for was a slim girl with red hair and a stockier girl with brown hair, age around seventeen, working together, with no record going back more than nine or ten months. When I got downtown, a disgusting old sergeant named Hobart, who smelled like he never took a bath, introduced me to his "girls." Mug shots, arrest records, descriptions of crimes, lewd comments. I also talked to some of the patrol cops who came in about new faces on the street who hadn't made the police blotter yet.

Needless to say, it was depress-

ing work. It left a bad taste in my mouth and a bad set of images in my mind, and when I left there at four thirty, I felt about as dirty as Hobart smelled and about as revolted by human behavior as I ever wanted to be. And since I hadn't come across the trail of any girls in pairs or singly that sounded at all like the Sumner twins, in a way it was sort of a wasted afternoon.

I spent the weekend doing the usual things I did in my Before Ginny days: jogging, playing softball, babysitting for my brother and sister-in-law, going to church—and on Monday morning I started where I'd left off, more or less, by calling around to the more likely towns and suburbs to see if the local cops had picked up any hard-luck girls who looked like Cindy and Sandy. Out of the fifteen or sixteen calls I made that morning, the only possible response I got was from the Elgin police, so I left the office about eleven, made it out to Elgin around noon, and walked out of the Elgin police headquarters at ten after twelve with one more negative. That's how a missing persons search works.

For a change of emphasis, I decided to switch to the other end of the problem, so I sat in the parking lot of a Burger King north of Elgin and studied a map while I ate my lunch and at a little past two o'clock I pulled into the drive of a modern looking brick and redwood ranch sheltered by the trees that lined the Lakepoint Country Club golf course.

I walked up to the front door and sounded the chimes. Twice. Three times.

No response.

I was halfway back to the car when a woman came around the corner of the house with a pair of grass shears in one hand and a pruning tool in the other. The temperature was in the mid-eighties, but she wore gardening gloves, long sleeves, and a broad-brimmed straw hat along with large, reflective sunglasses. Except that she was very tall, I couldn't tell much about her.

"Mrs. Emerson?" I said.

"I... was," she replied.

She had come to a stop, so I took a few steps closer. "My name is Carr. I'm a private investigator hired to trace Cindy and Sandy Sumner, who—"

"They're ... still missing, then?" she said.

"Then you know about it. Good. I'm not looking for them here, but if I could ask you a couple of questions, I'd appreciate it. You can call Chief Crabbe at the police station if you want to check me out." I handed her one of my cards.

She looked up and down the block, then said, "Let's go inside."

We went around the house to the back door, and she showed me into a family room off the kitchen. Then she shed the hat, the long-sleeved shirt, and the sunglasses and turned into a statuesque, fresh-faced blonde of around thirty-five in a T-shirt with a sunflower on it and tight blue jeans. With bellbottoms.

"I can't handle the sun," she said, gesturing at the hat and shirt. She had very fair skin with a sprinkling of freckles across a pretty, intelligent face, and I couldn't help wondering the obvious question but I

didn't ask it. Instead I said, "I'm just starting out on this thing, you understand, and I'm trying not to have preconceptions. That's one thing. The other thing is that the girls ran away just prior to Tom Emerson's appearance on the scene as a permanent fixture. That may or may not be cause and effect, but until I can get a handle on what your ex-husband is like, I don't have a hope of knowing, and until I do, I won't feel like I can even guess at the girls' motivation for leaving."

"But why come to me?" she asked. We were both still standing, and she motioned vaguely at one chair in the family room and sat in another.

I sat down, too. "What I'm hoping for is an honest assessment of Tom Emerson by someone who knows him well and who won't tell him that I'm asking around. Or my client Julia Emerson."

"Oh." She gave me an assessing look. "All right. What do you want to know exactly?"

I thought about it. "Let's start with background. How long were you married to him?"

"Eleven years, including the separation," she said.

"Any children?"

"A boy and a girl. I have custody." She made a vague gesture. "They're swimming this afternoon. Tom ... isn't very interested in his children, to be truthful, either mine or the son from his first marriage."

"His first marriage?" I said. "Then—"

"Yes. He's ..." She made a bitter face for a second, then said, "I wasn't the other woman, if that's what

you're wondering. He was divorced before we met."

"Was that around here?"

"No. In Madison. I was a graduate student at Wisconsin when he was teaching there. You know, don't you, that he's a professor of cultural anthropology at Northwestern? We came down here in 1963, when he decided he needed a change of scene."

I looked around the family room. In spite of Bill Crabbe's comment that the house was rather ordinary for Lakepoint Heights, it wasn't what a college professor could normally swing a mortgage on. So that meant money in the background.

"Why here and not Evanston?" I asked. "It's not an easy commute."

"Tom's a snob," she said. "When he came here to interview for the position, he drove around the suburbs and fell in love with Lakepoint Heights. I was at home in Madison with one baby in diapers and another on the way. I liked Madison."

"Uh-huh," I said. I thought for a moment. "What kind of man is he? You married him. You must have liked him at the time. I'm trying to get a picture, and it doesn't necessarily have to be negative."

She looked away from me and took a deep breath. "Outside of the classroom, I think Tom excels at only one thing. That is, he was notorious at Madison for—" She stopped as if unable to continue.

"His charm?" I said.

"Yes. Call it that. We met at a party, and I failed to be smitten. I think, to be frank, that I was taller than he was, I outweighed him, and I wasn't to be seduced—and that's

why we ended up getting married. I was a challenge for him.

"And he really was charming, and I fell for him in my own private way like a ton of bricks. That I was twenty-three and he was thirty-five and had a reputation that made Casanova's sound tame . . . I don't know. It seemed irrelevant.

"But by the time we moved here, he was indifferent to me. I can admit it now. I thought it was my fault for having gotten pregnant and put on weight." She looked at me finally. "I'm telling you about myself, I suppose, and not Tom. That's because I don't want to say what a creepy, sneaky liar he is. And that's only a start."

"Was he lewd or suggestive?" I asked. "Did he threaten you or hit you?"

"He has a way of . . . of saying and doing things to provoke responses. I told you wrongly—he's good at two things. The other is, he's a master of manipulative psychology."

"What might his attitude have been about going into a household with two teenage daughters in it?"

After a pause she replied, "I—couldn't say." Her voice was cold. It was as if she'd suddenly withdrawn into herself. But then she said, "I—when I—I knew he'd been having an affair, for five years at least I knew, but when I found out it was with that . . . woman, I—" She stood up and walked to a table. "I'm young looking, Mr. Carr. I'm pretty—I know I am. And I'm not a block of ice."

I couldn't help asking, "Then why are you staying here, so close, when it bothers you so much?"

"Because I want to make him pay! And her! I have a very public judgment. I have the house. I have the car. I have alimony and child support payments—" Her soft, clear face became hard and clouded.

I stood up. She had seemed like a pretty decent and level-headed person at first, and I wondered which part of her would win out in the end. I said, "I'm sorry. I think I'm stirring up bad feelings for you."

"Yes," she said. "You are."

"But I appreciate the help," I went on. "I'm on the side of the girls in this—not their mother and step-father."

"Yes. I—hope you find them. I do."

After we said goodbye, I took the long, slow route back south because I wanted to chew a little on what she'd told me about Tom Emerson. My impression of his character was a lot more developed because of the interview—that much was true—but now it included new things that I didn't like or understand.

**W**hat with stopping to buy some paint and brushes to use on the three-flat over the Labor Day weekend, I didn't make it back to my office until maybe five past five. When I got to the top of the stairs, I could see that the outer door stood open and the ceiling light was on, which probably meant that I had a visitor.

It was August, and I didn't run the air conditioning when I wasn't there, so the place was pretty hot and stuffy. I peeked through the door. "Hello? Anyone here?" And

then I saw her—the maid from Philip Sumner's apartment—sitting on the old dumpy sofa behind the door, with her shoes off and her legs in nylons stretched up on the magazine table. When she saw me, she took her legs down, slipped her feet into her shoes, and stood up.

I hadn't really paid much attention to her the previous Friday, except to get the feeling that she had a touch of insubordination in her manner. Now I saw that she was a little above average in height, and slim but with a fair amount of natural curvature. She had dark brown hair cut very short in what my wife informs me is a *gamin* style, and she wore far too much makeup for my taste, especially around the eyes. Her age was possibly twenty or twenty-one, and she looked hot and uncomfortable in the black, close-fitting maid's uniform she wore, minus Friday's cap and apron.

"I've got something for you," she said in a hard, assured tone. "Do we go in there?" She jerked her head toward the door to the inner office.

"Yeah. Sure," I said. "I'll put the air conditioner on and get you something cold to drink. Sorry you had to wait."

"It wasn't long," she replied. "And I'm used to it." I got her seated in the other room with the cooler blowing on high and a can of diet cola in her hand, plus one for myself. Then I sat behind the desk and said, "So—what have you got for me?"

She finished a long sip of the soda, then said, "It'll cost something."

"What is it?" I asked.

She opened her purse and pulled out a sheet of paper that had been

folded several times into a small square; then she flipped it up onto the desk. I unfolded it and smoothed it out flat. It was a letter, of sorts, dated August twelfth, and it said:

*Deario, deario, Dad-dad-daddy-O,  
No snow here yet, but the skiing's  
worth the wait.*

*It's 1972—do you know where  
your children are?*

*Hugs and kisses to Our Dear  
Mother.*

*The Vermont Maple Twins,  
Cindy Sandy*

I looked up and said, "How did you get this thing?"

"Doesn't matter," she answered. "What's it worth?"

"You're very trusting, aren't you—seeing that I've already got it?"

"I figure you'll be straight with me. You look that way."

"Uh-huh. Tell me how you got it and we'll see. Also—what's your name? Just so we can say we've been introduced."

"Vicki," she said. "Vicki Daley—like the mayor."

"And how did you get this letter, Vicki?" I asked.

"George got it." She rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling.

"How?"

"He snoops."

"Where's the envelope?"

She shook her head. "Don't know."

"Where's George?"

"Couldn't come."

She tried to make herself look bored.

"So he sent you," I said, thinking about it. "But asking for payment is your idea, not his."

"Ah—that stupid fairy. I'm worried about those daughters," she said, speaking in a passable imitation of George's modulated voice.

I looked at her closely again. Her eyebrows had been plucked and penciled in, I realized suddenly, and that added an edge to her already sharp features.

She shifted under my gaze and crossed her legs. "I had to give it to you anyway," she said, shrugging.

"Where do you live?" I asked. "On the premises?"

"Yeah. Downstairs. The room's okay and the board's pretty good, but the pay stinks. That's why . . ." Her eyes drifted toward the letter.

I got the first letter out of my case and put the two side by side. It would have been impossible to have forged the second, I thought, without having a healthy sample of Sandy's handwriting. And there was no real reason to write a forged letter, anyway.

"Two hundred dollars," I said, peering up. "For this. I'll fudge it into my expenses. There's no posted reward, but if this leads me to the twins, I'll put in a strong word for you and George with Mrs. Emerson."

She looked rather surprised for a moment. She sat still and licked her lips, then said, "You're different, aren't you?"

"Well," I said. "I don't have the two hundred on me, so it could all be a bluff."

"Oh." She paused. "I guess I'd better tell George about this, huh? How you're handling things? He—he's going to be mad."

"Do you like George?" I asked.



She considered for a moment and her face became sharp again. "He's all right—for one of them."

"Don't you feel a little uncomfortable," I went on, "living in that kind of household?"

She seemed to think some more, and then a knowing smile crossed her face. "Well, it's like this," she said. "George is one of them, and there's nothing you can do about that, but old Philip, now, he's the kind that likes to have it both ways, if you know what I mean." She winked her right eye at me, looked at her watch, and stood up.

"Got to catch a bus," she said. "I'll trust you for the money. You know where to find me."

I stood, too. "Fine," I said. "Just don't trip and fall down the stairs trying to act too hard and wicked, Vicki. Okay?"

"Not me," she replied—not cracking a smile.

I followed her out and stood watching her light a cigarette in the hall before she went down. When I heard the entry door close from below, I ran down and looked out cautiously. She'd moved fifty feet west along Belmont to where there was a break in the parked cars and was puffing away greedily on the cigarette, watching the eastbound traffic flow toward her. After about two minutes a Mercedes-Benz sedan pulled to a stop, and she stepped off the curb and got in the front.

I moved back inside the glass door, but as they rolled by me, I could see the driver of the Mercedes pretty well. It was George. The guy who couldn't come.

That night was another first—

my first really bad night's sleep because of a complicated, unsatisfying investigation.

After dinner I called my client and told her I needed travel money—I said for Colorado, just to keep things simple—and a couple of hundred more for expenses once I got there. She laughed and said I'd need more than a couple of hundred. She'd have a check for a thousand ready the next morning for me—and when was I going?

I said I was leaving Wednesday and filled her up with a variety of lies to make the trip sound plausible and worthwhile. I didn't want to tell her, you see, that her ex-husband had held back the letter pointing to Vermont, not only because of the circumstances under which I'd gotten hold of it, but also because of the way she and Sumner seemed to hate each other.

That may sound a little unclear as a motive for lying to my client, but I was a little unclear about the whole thing myself. After I got off the phone, I sat in the living room of the flat with a bottle of beer or two and tried to sort out my impressions. The maid, Vicki Daley, I concluded, liked to act tough and independent, but she was basically just doing what George told her.

Philip Sumner also seemed pretty straightforward to me. For reasons of his own, he obviously had decided not to pass along the note or the information it contained. This, I realized, was not necessarily out of evil intent. He might've thought Cindy and Sandy were better off away from their mother's household, or he might have had a sus-

picion, as I did myself, that the letter was an attempt at misdirection and so not entirely to be trusted. He also, of course, might have kept silent simply to make mischief.

The euphonious George was the one of the three that I couldn't figure out, mainly because it didn't make sense for him to send Vicki Daley with the letter if he were able to come himself. I looked at it from every angle I could come up with—that he couldn't leave until later, so he sent Vicki ahead; that he didn't want to appear in the thing; that he had stolen the letter out of Sumner's mail before Sumner even got a chance to see it and then had panicked and wanted to dump it.

I knew in my guts that all these theories were wrong. George had deliberately dropped Vicki off with the letter and set a time to pick her up again out along Belmont Avenue. Nothing else made sense. That meant that he was not only a party to Vicki's ploy of selling the letter; he had probably invented the ploy and told her to use it.

But at first this didn't exactly make sense to me either. Then I realized part of it—if I hadn't sneaked down and watched, I wouldn't have seen George picking up Vicki, and I would have accepted her story, or at least not questioned its likelihood nearly so critically. By using Vicki, George—for some obscure reason—was putting a move on me. I couldn't for the life of me see why he was doing it, though.

And then there was the other end of the case: Tom Emerson. I'd seen the man only once, poorly, from thirty feet away—which means, with

my vision, that his features were blurred. Bill Crabbe found him creepy, and his ex-wife called him a creep and a liar. He was a middle-aged Lothario who had preferred a rather ordinary woman, ordinary in appearance at least, to a younger and more physically attractive one. And this when he didn't necessarily have to prefer either: he taught at a campus full of even younger women on whom to exercise his charm nine or ten months a year.

I thought about a lot of other things, too: my client Julia Emerson; my prospective plane trip to Vermont—or possibly to Colorado; since it occurred to me that the note might be a double bluff to get the police in Colorado to stop hunting. Then there were the twins themselves—their motives for running away and for writing the two notes, their precarious situation wherever they were.

I know now that if I'd had Ginny there to comment on the case I would have gotten further along and faster, but since I didn't have her, I rolled out the next morning after some very bad sleep feeling not merely stupid and confused but without hope. Because I had to do something, though, I called a travel agent over at Central and Belmont and booked flights for Wednesday morning to Boston and Denver both, only then I changed my mind and cancelled the Denver flight. Instead I called a couple of Colorado law enforcement agencies that had been involved in the search earlier and basically just said, "Stay alert out there, because they might actually show up somewhere."

I booked a motel reservation in Burlington for an indeterminate stay and a car rental at the Boston airport and dropped off a suit and a sport coat for a quick dry cleaning at Nathan's across the street from my office. By then it was almost ten thirty, but other than driving up to Lakepoint Heights sometime to pick up Mrs. Emerson's check, I didn't have anything specific planned for the rest of the day, so I decided on impulse that since I had time on my hands and absolutely no leads that weren't covered, I was at least going to find out—if I could—what my little buddy George was up to, sending the maid over to my office with the girls' letter. After thinking for a minute or two, I picked up the phone and dialed Sumner's apartment. Luck was with me—it was George who answered.

"George?" I said. "This is R. J. Carr. Are you alone?"

There was a hesitation on the line; then he said, "Yes."

"I need to talk to you about that letter. In person. No maid, no Philip Sumner. Can I buy you lunch?"

"Oh," he said. "Oh dear. I . . . don't know."

"Well, can you make an excuse to be gone for a while and meet me for a few minutes around the corner from your place? It won't take long."

"I . . . guess so," he said.

So we made an arrangement to meet a block from the Sumner apartment at eleven thirty. What with finding a parking place in that neighborhood, I was a couple of minutes late, but George was later. I stood there on the corner and peered down the long block in time to see

him come out of the building looking at his watch and then hurry toward me with a bouncy stride. It was turning into a hot day, even there near the lake, and extremely breezy, and by the time he made it to my corner George's hair was blown all askew and his face was pink and moist.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said, looking up. "And this wind is terrible."

"Yeah," I said. "Why don't we go sit in my car. It's in the next block."

We hadn't shaken hands, which ordinarily is fine with me, but George was keeping his hands in his suit pockets again as we walked along, and that was a little strange, especially considering the wind and the heat.

I unlocked the passenger door when we got to the car and watched as he settled in; then I hurried around and got in on the driver's side in time to see him straightening and patting his hair back into place. And that's when I knew why George had sent Vicki with the letter: it was so she could do exactly what she did do—act tough and call George "one of them."

And that's when I also knew that I'd been wrong in practically every premise I'd developed and every conjecture I'd made the previous night.

I sat for a moment without saying anything, looking straight ahead trying to decide what I should do with George, letting it all settle a little in my mind.

"Are . . . you okay, Mr. Carr?" George asked.

I looked at him and decided I had to be right, so I said, "Yeah, I'm okay. But you know, Sandy, it'll be a lot

easier on you if you skip that phony voice from now on." Her eyes grew wide behind the glasses, and there was a touch of fear in them. I said, "And rip off that mustache so I can get a good look at your face. I don't want to have to make a physical gender check, but I will if you won't cooperate."

She glanced at the door handle, and I grabbed her left wrist.

"You've got nice, feminine hands. I wasn't looking last week, and you've kept them in your pockets for the most part."

"All right," she said, finally. Her true voice was that of her mother, minus the years and the hard living. I let go and watched her work the mustache loose. She rubbed her upper lip, then took off the glasses and turned her head.

"It's me," she said with a sad, forced smile. "Blondes don't have more fun." That's when the tears started.

"I'm so hot," she said. She gave a sort of half-sob. "I've got on all this padding to . . ."

I let her cry a little, then handed her my handkerchief. "Tell me about it," I said. "Take your time."

"Cindy said you were a strange man," she said, sniffing a little. "I knew when I saw you that we were in trouble."

"And you weren't in trouble before?" I asked her.

"Oh God! You don't know, Mr. Carr!"

"Then tell me," I said. "I'll get you started. The scandal involving your mother and Tom Emerson was pretty hard on you. And the fact that they were getting married was

even worse. You pick it up from there."

"We hated him," she said, staring straight ahead, then looking at me. "He—it was so humiliating. And Mother—she didn't care. She was determined to have him. But that's not why we . . . did it." She looked away again. "If I tell you, will you not . . . make it into a big deal?" I didn't answer, and she went on, "If only it were possible, I'd go back home now. I would. I want to see Mother. And Cindy—she's about to go crazy. And we're missing school." She closed her eyes and a tear leaked down her cheek.

"It really starts a year ago in June. This is the part you can't tell anyone. There was a formal party Cindy and I went to. We weren't that popular, but this time we got dates arranged. I . . . had a stupid crush on the boy I went with, but he only asked me, it turned out, because Karen—this other girl—was going with someone else.

"He spent the evening ignoring me so much that I got mad and asked him to take me home early. It sounds stupid now. He'd just gotten his driver's license, so he was the one who drove the four of us; otherwise I wouldn't have done it." She took a deep breath. "Well, he drove me to our house in dead silence, and I was boiling mad. I said something very sarcastic to him when we got there and slammed the door and ran up into the house, feeling so mad and humiliated I could barely keep from screaming. It was about eleven, I think, and the front of the house was dark. I went back into this big living room

we have where there were some lights on, and Mother and Tom were there, near the back, dressed in robes—so I knew what they'd been doing while we were at the party. Mother was holding a drink, and Tom was smoking a joint—I could tell from the pot smell.

"It all seemed so bad just then, Mr. Carr, and hopeless, and I was madder than before. I walked across the room to the liquor chest and made myself a drink, even though I don't care for whisky that much. I looked at Mother and Tom to be sure they were watching me, and I picked up one of Mother's cigarettes and lit it and inhaled. Then I took a drink and walked over in front of them."

"You were how old then?" I asked. "Fifteen?"

"Almost sixteen. Cindy and I were smoking then anyway, a little. Mother—she caught us once and told us we should wait awhile, but she didn't stop us. Now I'm hooked. I wish I'd brought a pack with me. But I'm not as bad as Cindy—she's a chimney. Smoking's about all there is to do, hanging around Philip's apartment."

She stopped and looked at me.

"You were standing in front of your mother and Tom Emerson," I said to prompt her.

"This is where it gets hard," she said. "I—I was dressed in a very grownup party dress, low-cut with a long skirt. I had on heels and nylons and lots of makeup, and my hair was up. I . . . looked older than I was, I think. I do anyway."

"We had a strained conversation. I hated Tom, and I would never even

turn my head his way if I could help it. But suddenly he said, "Look, Julie, look at her! Can't you see it? She looks just like you twenty years ago!" He stood up and came across to me, smelling like pot, and although I was holding things in my hands, he put his arms around me and tried to pull me close and kiss me."

Sandy stopped talking for a minute and rubbed her eyes: "I pushed him back, and I think Mother said something to him—I don't remember what—and it was over. I was very controlled. I finished my drink and went to my room. And locked the door."

"And after that, every time Tom was around when I was present—and he was around a lot because their wedding was coming up in August—I had the feeling he was watching me. And Cindy had the feeling he was watching her. It was sick."

"So we decided we had to get away before he moved in. The wedding was terrible. Big and showy and phony. And we both had to dance with him at the reception. I almost fainted—honestly."

"We—we waited until they were gone on their honeymoon and then we took the Greyhound to Denver. That was a year ago yesterday. It wasn't fun like we thought it would be."

"And in December we were . . . getting desperate. We had a room rented through the month, but—it was getting tight. So we came back. To Philip—he hates being called Dad. And he took us in. And we worked our disguises up. But we

only go out around here, usually. I drove Philip's car yesterday without a license, and I was scared to death."

She looked at her watch and said, "Oh, m'gosh! I've got to get back." Then she looked at me and said, "Please. Don't..."

I shook my head. "No. I'm sorry, Sandy, but I'm going back with you. You and Cindy and Philip and I are going to have a very frank discussion and then I'm taking you to Lakepoint Heights to talk to the police chief about what to do."

"Philip's not home today," she said. "Really—he isn't. But Cindy must be frantic by now. Please! Or, come back with me—that's okay—we'll sneak in the garage entrance. I'll explain when we get there. Can I? Please?"

Well, I was pretty uneasy about the situation and didn't have any idea of what was the right thing to do. That's why I wanted to bring Bill Crabbe into it. So I said, "All right. I want to see Cindy anyway. But don't kid yourself, Sandy. You have been officially found."

When we walked into the apartment, Cindy was standing near the door in her uniform with an apprehensive expression on her face. Sandy immediately said, "He knows, Cindy. He figured it out." They came together and hugged each other, and both started to cry.

I stood there watching, still trying to identify Cindy as the girl in the picture. Sandy without the glasses and the fake mustache was recognizable. Her hair was blonde and cut in that sort of not-quite-pageboy look, but she was undoubt-

edly an older version of the girl in the photograph and rather like her mother. Cindy, however, even without the aid of glasses or facial hair, was so different from the grinning young teenage girl with the long, curly red locks that I still wasn't sure. The dark brown hair clipped short, the exposed ears, the heavy makeup, the penciled eyebrows...

I said, "I need to talk to Cindy for a minute."

They separated. Sandy said, "I—can I go change? I hate this suit."

"Just don't leave," I said. Then to Cindy I said, "It's—not that bad, but I have to make a check. To identify you." I stepped close to her as she eyed me. "I need to see your hair roots."

"Oh!" she said. "I'm me. Here, look!" She ran her fingers up into her hair and let me lean over to see the reddish roots. Then she walked to a mirror and rubbed away a lot of the eye makeup with a handkerchief. "I'll be glad to get my eyebrows back," she said, turning around smiling and blinking her eyes. Then I knew her. She looked two or three years younger and not nearly so sharp and hard.

"Do you... have handcuffs?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Did Sandy tell you why we ran away?"

"You tell me," I said, just as a test, I suppose. But she gave a shortened version of the same story. And she hesitated in the same spot.

"Did you tell him yet?" Sandy said as she came back into the room. She wore a boat-necked T-shirt and bellbottom Levi's, the uniform of



the early seventies, and looked fairly trim and very female. She was smoking a cigarette, and when Cindy saw her, she immediately lit one, too. I wanted to lecture them on that, but I decided there were more important things to talk about.

"What didn't Cindy tell me?" I asked.

"We—can't leave here, that's all," Sandy said. "You've got to believe us."

"We . . . we're wanted criminals," said Cindy, looking up at me, then away. Now that she wasn't acting tough, she seemed rather meek.

I said, "You'll have to explain. I don't get it." But I thought I did get it, actually.

They looked at each other, then Cindy said. "We ran out of money. We were in Denver, and it was cold, and Christmas came, and . . . we had *peanut butter sandwiches* for Christmas! And that left us with four slices of bread. I was so homesick. We had to do something, and we . . . weren't going to call Mother." She shook her head. "We lived in a room and . . . and, well, we decided we had to come here and beg Philip to help. But we had to have the fare. So we stole it."

"How?"

They looked at each other again.

Sandy said, "What's wrong with your cheek, Mr. Carr?"

Neither of them had seemed to notice it before that, which I always take to be a good sign in people. "It's a birthmark," I said. "Why?"

"It makes you look—I don't know—like a person you can trust, that's all," she replied. "We trusted Philip, and it didn't work out."

"We pretended to be hookers," Cindy said in a breathless tone. "We made a plan. Sandy did. We got a man . . . interested. We made him show us his money and went up to our room and—"

"We stole his pants with the money and locked him in the room," Sandy said. "We'd hidden our bags in the closet downstairs, and we ran to a cab station and took a cab to the Greyhound depot and we got away with it. We thought."

I looked at them closely.

"Don't worry—we're still a pair of hopeless virgins," Cindy remarked, returning my gaze. "In spite of what I said to you yesterday."

"Let's hear the rest of it," I said. "What about your father?"

"We made it to Chicago on December twenty-eighth. It was snowing. We had about twenty dollars left of the money, and we were going to give up and take the Northwestern train to Lakepoint Heights if Philip wouldn't help us.

"We got here around eight, after the doorman goes off. Philip was home, though, and he let us come up and we told him everything, and he said we could stay overnight and he'd think about it."

"He's not using you as slave labor, is he?" I asked.

"No—nothing like that!" Sandy said. "Honestly. We don't clean, we don't help him—we don't do anything. That's—he's got a woman who cooks and keeps house; she's downstairs now. She's an illegal from Mexico, and she thinks we're funny. So it's all just . . . an act. I don't even think Philip is gay. He just said it would be a good way to

disguise me, since I look so much like Mother, normally. And I hate it. I . . . ”

“So why can’t you leave?” I asked.

“Because Philip won’t let us,” Cindy said. “He says we have to stay here for two more years, or he’ll tell the Denver police about how we stole the man’s money.”

“What?” I said. “That’s crazy.”

“It’s true,” Cindy said. “Philip—he researched it somehow. The man filed a complaint. We used false names, but the landlady described us real well. We’re wanted for soliciting sex and robbery. Or theft—I don’t remember which. If we could get some money, maybe we could mail it to him and explain and ask him to drop the charges—that’s what I keep thinking. But . . . ” She stopped and sighed.

Sandy said, “That’s why you can’t—you have to go away and not come back, Mr. Carr! We’ll pay you—I promise we will—but it’ll be 1974. Just leave us alone. Please!”

I didn’t say anything for a moment, mainly because I didn’t know what to say. Together they’d gone right off the rails, what with being on the run and then being cooped up for so long, with the result that they were living half their lives in a fantasy world and it was a pretty grim fantasy. Finally I decided to take a chance on something they’d said earlier. I stood up. “Have you got any money at all? Fifty cents? A dollar?”

Cindy put a hand in her apron and pulled out two crumpled singles.

“You’re hiring me,” I said. Without any hesitation, she held her arm

straight out with the bills. I took one. “For unspecified services. I’ll ask you for something more later on. You won’t hear from me tomorrow, but I’ll call you the day after that.” I looked at them, trying to appear stern. “You’d better be here—that’s part of the contract. And if I ask you to do something, you have to do it, even if it seems . . . funny. All right?”

They looked at each other.

“This is trust,” I said. “The dollar just makes it legal. I trust you, and you trust me.”

“Not like Philip,” said Cindy.

“I’ll call at two o’clock. Thursday afternoon. And if I say jump out the window, you take a flying leap because I’ll have a net down below. You understand?”

They said they did. I’m not sure I did, though. It was all a little crazy and very sad. After that I left and went out through the garage the way we’d come in.

I had a lot to do in forty-eight hours.

I’m not sure I even liked Cindy and Sandy that much, to tell the truth, though I felt a tremendous responsibility for them. They were too modern for me, I guess, even in 1972.

At sixteen they were comfortably into a world of sophisticated stuff—smoking and drinking and knowingness, at least, about the less appealing aspects of sexual behavior. Drugs. But at the same time, like too many kids their age, they had so little notion of how things really work in the world that they would take anyone’s word for it, meaning,

in this particular instance, Philip Sumner's.

I had a busy two days, and by my watch it was two o'clock exactly on Thursday afternoon when I slipped the doorman of Sumner's building a five to let me call upstairs and announce myself.

I got Cindy this time. "I'm in the foyer," I said, speaking low so no one around me could hear. "I'm coming up to talk to Philip if he's in."

"But—"

"It's necessary. Remember the contract. Is he there?"

"Yes. He'll hate it and blame us."

"That can't be helped. Hit the buzzer, and I'll see you in a minute."

Sandy opened the door of the apartment dressed as George again, and that's when things started to happen. I hadn't told Cindy that I wasn't alone. Julia and Tom Emerson were with me. Also Bill Crabbe.

Sandy fell back by Cindy, both of them looking like stunned deer. Before anyone else could talk, I said, "You two remember our contract! I've got your money!"

It took possibly three seconds for Julia Emerson to wake up and recognize her own daughters, but again I didn't wait. I said, "Everybody—the study's this way. You can talk later." Being large and ugly has a couple of advantages; you can make people fall in line, for one thing. I herded them through the two rooms, threw open the door to Sumner's study, and announced, "We're going to have a conference."

I never saw a person's face go through so many changes in so short a space of time as Sumner's did in the next two or three seconds. He

started to talk, but I pointed a finger at him and said, "You shut up. You'll get your turn."

I won't say I was mad, exactly. It was deeper and stronger than that.

I assigned seats like a parole officer; then I said, "I'm here representing Cindy and Sandy." They sat flanking their mother on the sofa, and that strange woman had an arm around each one and was crying and kissing them in turn. All three were crying and hugging. It was an amazing scene. It made me feel like there might be some hope left in the world after all.

I said, "I'm not taking this chronologically because I want Cindy and Sandy to know something right away." I took a document from my pocket, opened it, and started reading: "I, Louis Hartman, of Commerce City, Colorado, on this 29th day of August 1972, having received restitution, plus interest and other consideration, for the sum borrowed from me on December 27, 1971, by two women calling themselves Carol Brown and Linda Freeman, do request that legal charges made in Circuit Court December 28, 1971, against said Brown and Freeman, be dropped."

I looked over at the girls. "They were dropped this morning. I got a call at noon from the cop I worked with."

Then I said, "Maybe we should all just talk to Cindy and Sandy. I'll start. When I left here Tuesday, you two, I drove to Lakepoint Heights and collected a check from your mother to finance a trip to Colorado that I was scheduled to make yesterday anyway. Only it was to

Vermont—you girls know why, and I'll let you explain later.

"Anyway, I told a lot of lies to your mother, and then I drove up to Waukegan to the Lake County Courthouse and asked to see the will of Lydia Quincy Parks. While I was there, I checked on another document regarding a divorce decree between Philip Grant Sumner and Julia Parks Sumner, only I wasn't as lucky on that one. I drove back to Lakepoint Heights and borrowed a phone from the gentleman in the corner, who is Mr. Bill Crabbe, the police chief of Lakepoint Heights, and made a technically illegal phone call insofar as I disguised my voice and represented myself as an assistant in the alumni records department of the University of Wisconsin."

"That was you!" said Julia Emerson. "But why—"

"I'll come to that."

I took a couple of seconds to stare around at the grouping. Bill Crabbe had his usual look—as if he were trying not to grin. The girls still seemed stunned—happy, nervous, tearful, yeah, but stunned. Julia Emerson had recovered her composure but still held the girls tight. Tom Emerson was a surprise to me. Close up, he had an intelligent face with rather sharp features, and on this occasion he appeared genuinely moved. Whether he was or not I didn't know.

When I turned the other way I could see the surprise host of the party, and he didn't look too good. He knew what was coming maybe.

"Yesterday morning I flew to Denver and spent the day basically get-

ting the document I just read attended to. I flew back last night, and this morning, girls, I told some more lies to your mother. I told her Philip back there—" I pointed behind me with my thumb "—had requested a conference about you at his apartment at two o'clock. He wouldn't discuss it over the phone, but it involved a piece of critical information regarding your whereabouts.

"Those were all lies, Mrs. Emerson," I said, looking at her. "I was the one who wanted this conference. Cindy and Sandy can tell you the details, but basically what happened was this—all last fall they managed to elude the Denver police, but late in December they ran out of money and conned a man named Lou Hartman out of enough to pay the bus fare back to Chicago. They felt ambivalent about going to Lakepoint Heights for reasons I'll go into later, so they stopped here at Sumner's and asked for help and advice. And as a result of his help and advice, they've been living here under a form of duress since the first of the year, disguised, as you can see, as a male research assistant and a parlormaid.

"That's about it in outline, I guess, but everyone here except Chief Crabbe, maybe, knows that that's not it at all. There are three other factors to consider, and two of them are pretty unpleasant. Let's take the pleasant one first and get it out of the way: the main problem is solved. The girls are here, they're whole, they're ready to go home and face whatever they have to face.

"Mrs. Emerson, the fact is, the main reason these girls want to go

home is that they love you—which, I guess, is something we never got around to discussing the other day but I hope you'll give it a lot of weight in how you proceed in the next few months. That's the pleasant factor.

"Unpleasant factor number one is why the girls left in the first place. You said to me 'Let's be frank' the other day, but then you weren't. I had to find things out for myself. I don't blame you exactly because part of what I found out is less than flattering to you and your current and former husbands, and part of it, I think, is stuff you thought you had to keep secret, especially from Cindy and Sandy, because they were too young to handle it.

"It's my opinion, though, that as of today they're no longer too young, so I'm going to tell them. Anyone present can correct me if I'm wrong in the details, but I won't stop just because it's unpleasant. I'm doing this for you girls," I said to them. "So hold tight to your mother. I think she's discovered how much more you mean to her than she ever believed.

"Everybody ready?" I said, looking around. "Your great-grandmother, Cindy and Sandy, doted on your mother when she was a child. She died when your mother was ten or eleven, but she left a third of her estate in trust for her. You might know this already. But what I'm sure you don't know is that she attached some strings to the estate as doting people sometimes do. Half of the money held in trust was to go to your mother on the night of her marriage—that's how it's word-

ed in the will—or else on her thirtieth birthday if she failed to marry before that time. The other half of the money was to go to her in trust on the birth of her first child and was to be 'administered liberally,' the will says, by a third party—your mother's lawyer, I'd guess—for the benefit of any and all children from her marriage until the youngest reached the age of eighteen. Then the remainder was to be divided, half to her and the other half among the children equally but held in trust until they married or reached the age of thirty. There was one more relevant clause, but I'm going to save that till later.

"And now for some more history you don't know about. When your mother was away at the University of Wisconsin, as she verified for me over the phone yesterday, she met and fell in love with a young man, but in the end they didn't marry. She came home feeling bitter and cynical after she graduated. I'm guessing, and having learned of the marriage clause in her grandmother's will, she decided that eight more years was a long time to wait. One thing I think I can say fairly certainly about your mother: she felt like she would never care for any other man as much as she cared for the fellow she'd known at college, so any husband she found would be a compromise.

"She met Philip Sumner and was quite frank with him about the state of her feelings and the state of her financial advantages, and they got married, hoping, I suspect, for the best. Or—maybe not entirely.

"I say that because sometime in

January of the year they were to be married your mother met with the Wisconsin fellow for one last time—I don't have any idea what the circumstances were—and you two girls were the unexpected result of that meeting. In other words, Cindy and Sandy, the man behind me at the desk is only your adoptive father, not your natural father.

"Wisely, I think, both he and your mother kept this fact from you when you were younger. I'm going against that wisdom today for a reason, and my reason is that I'm hoping the knowledge makes your future lives a little less traumatic."

I turned to Tom Emerson. "You know, Mr. Emerson, these girls hate and fear you so much that they headed for the hills rather than live in the same house with you. I've dug into your past enough to know that in two previous marriages you've fathered three children and then basically ignored them. You weren't faithful to either of your first two wives. You are not on anyone's top ten list of responsible adults, much less responsible parents. You scared Sandy out of her wits one night when you tried to kiss her, and then you were such a jellyfish that you wouldn't explain. You just hung around looking at Cindy and Sandy like a dirty old man in a public park. Why don't you tell them, for God's sake!"

"How would you like a punch in the mouth?" he replied. When he stood up, he was shaking with anger, but instead of coming at me, he stepped before his wife and the twins and said, "Girls, please listen to me. My . . . my shortcomings

have been widely discussed lately." He glanced back at me. "If I have one virtue, however, it's this—that I have stayed in love with your mother since before you were born. Circumstances haven't treated us easily. When she was free, I was married; when I was free, she was married. Until now. But I did not know, Sandy, I had no idea, that I was your father until your mother told me so earlier that same night, the night when I wanted to give you a father's kiss.

"I sincerely apologize. When you came in unexpectedly, I was still stunned by the fact of it, and a little high, and later I was at a loss to explain my position to either of you. And your mother forbade me. I hope—I hope we can learn at least to be friends."

It was an impressive speech and it sounded sincere, but the girls were looking up at him as if they didn't know whether to believe him or not. As for me, I would have felt more comfortable about it if he *had* taken a swing at me.

Cindy finally said, "I'll try if Sandy will."

Sandy said, "Well, Mother—you could have told us."

Their mother said, "This is my first chance, you little monkey! I was going to explain when we got back from the honeymoon." She kissed the forehead of each daughter. "So there—Tom is your father. He made life hell for me in 1953, and I've loved him ever since. So now you know.

"Go sit, darling," she said to Emerson. "I want to hear what my detective has to say about Philip. It's



so like you not to offer me a drink, Philip."

"It's no wonder you need one, Julia. You must be rather . . . apprehensive, shall we say, about what Mr. Carr hasn't said yet. You girls are in for a sad awakening, I fear, about your newly affectionate mother."

She laughed at him. "Get it out of the way, please, Mr. Carr. And then do tell me what rock the snake has been lying under."

I let this exchange die out before I said, "Sandy? Cindy? I hope you're okay. I'm the one to blame if things don't seem like they're going right. What your mother and—" I gestured at Sumner—"whatever he is to you now, what they're fencing about is that last clause in your great-grandmother's will, the one I said I'd explain later."

"You remember the trust set up for the children, right? For you, in other words. Under the terms of the will, if no children survived to the age of eighteen, the money left in the trust was to be donated to a list of charitable causes rather than passing to your mother."

"And so you see, don't you, that your mother did have a sizable financial stake in finding you. Not being able to prove you were alive a year or so from now might have led to a serious legal question about the money."

"Yes!" said Philip Sumner from behind me. "She doesn't love you, girls. Don't believe it. She loves the half-million dollars she stood to lose!"

At that moment, entirely without warning, Tom Emerson shot past

me around the corner of Sumner's desk. He grabbed the lapels of Sumner's coat and shouted, "On your feet, you insinuating queer!"

Well, Crabbe and I got them separated and quieted down and back in their separate corners. When I finally was able to look around, the girls seemed a little scared to me but not too much. Julia Emerson seemed rather pleased.

"I knew!" she said. "When I saw my girls here, Philip, I knew your greedy little brain was churning away about that trust fund. Cindy, Sandy, my sweet girls, was I ever not affectionate to you? Did I ever deny you anything? I have never—it's my word against that man's! Mr. Carr, will you believe me?"

And strangely enough, I did believe her.

I said, "I believe that finding the girls was always your objective. I do believe that much—yeah. But I also believe that you got discouraged there for a while and gave up hope. I think that's why you hired me—because it was hopeless. You would have gone to Norton Security or David Falucci or one of the other big names if you'd thought your daughters could be found by hunting. I was just some kind of futile gesture in your mind. So do me a favor, Mrs. Emerson: don't give up so easily. Not now. Not when Cindy and Sandy are going to need to trust you for help for quite a while."

"Because," I said, "they trusted Sumner here and he betrayed them overnight for no reason than to bedevil you about them and that trust fund. You realize that, don't you? He was trying to keep them under

wraps until past their eighteenth birthday."

I looked over at Crabbe. "This guy threatened to return them to the Denver authorities unless they stayed here under his thumb for two more years, Bill. It's duress, and I'd guess it's provable. Isn't there any way we can get him for illegal restraint if we can't get him on a kidnapping rap?"

Before Crabbe could respond, Julia Emerson said suddenly, "Oh, you are so *wonderful*, Philip! You make all my mistakes and peccadillos seem so innocent and clean! You wanted to find out why we were divorced, didn't you, Mr. Carr? You have rather a talent, I see. Let me reward your curiosity: Philip and I had one of the few marriages in recent history—"

"Don't say it, Julia!" Sumner said in a harsh, commanding tone.

"—that produced children but was unconsummated. He's not gay, darling," she said to her husband with a laugh. "Gay is simply not a word anyone could apply to Philip in any sense. He's a sort of a . . . a eunuch, really. He had a small accident, it seems, when he was in the army. Which he failed to mention until our wedding night. Didn't you, Philip?"

"After you had bribed me to make you a respectable woman, did that matter?" he responded defensively.

She took her arms away from her daughters' shoulders and stood. "Tom, girls," she said, "it's time we went home. I'm acting vindictive, which I hate. Mr. Carr, you may beat Philip to a pulp if you so desire, and I will back you in court. Or—

no, don't do it. It would give him too much satisfaction. Send me a bill for what it cost you to keep Cindy and Sandy, Philip. Don't pad it too much, or I won't pay."

She marched out of the room with everyone but Sumner following, and that was how the case ended, more or less.

It was only afterwards that I realized that the affair had had in it virtually everything anyone could ever dream up in terms of high-sounding motive—greed, hate, fear, revenge, passion. The trouble for me was that close up those things had turned out to look pretty banal and petty in such a flawed and fallible collection of people. In fact, even though there was nothing at all in it approaching murder or mayhem—and I've seen plenty of both since—the case still strikes me after this much time as one of the lowest, most miserable pieces of business I've ever been involved in.

The twins did redeem it in a way, I guess, by turning their lives around once they got back home, but their mother, who had seemed there at Sumner's to be not nearly as shallow as I had thought—well, she reverted to form later, according to Bill Crabbe, and started worrying that I might try to blackmail her in the future by taking advantage of the fact that her daughters liked me pretty well. There was absolutely no logic to this idea and Crabbe managed to talk her out of it, but to me it was just one more kick in the head.

What else? Well, she did start paying a lot more attention to her

daughters and helped them over some hard spots, so I can't fault her in that. And Tom Emerson didn't turn out to be a secret sex offender after all, which was also good.

As for Philip Sumner, though, it's discouraging even now to think that he came through the thing pretty much scot-free, but on the other hand, maybe he didn't, not really, because the guy had to go on living with himself after all and that would have been like a jail sentence to almost anyone. He died a couple of years back, actually, but Julia and Tom Emerson have stayed married and grown old together in the same house up in Lakepoint Heights.

Cindy and Sandy? Well, I still get Christmas cards from Cindy,

who started sending them to me that very first year, secretly, in defiance of her mother. Signed "Peanut Butter Sandwiches." They both went to college, got married, had children. Cindy's divorced, Sandy's still married—as of last December anyway. They both live in the East. I don't know much more, but at least they aren't on the street or institutionalized. They got to be adults and are living some kind of reasonable life, when they might almost as easily have suffered irreparable emotional damage at age sixteen except for an ad in the yellow pages and a little bit of luck.

That's the Sumner business from beginning to end. I still don't like the memory of it, but it might have turned out worse.

**Note to Our Readers:** If you have difficulty finding *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the November issue.*

The bicycle lying in the Las Vegas gutter was a total wreck. Fortunately the boy was only bruised. He stood uncertainly, bewildered and in shock. Minutes later, seeing the gathering crowd and sensing that something was wrong, Joe Patillo braked his patrol car. He and his partner, Bill Gruman, elbowed their way to the center of the group. It was obvious what had happened. "You hurt badly, son?" asked Joe.

"N-n-no, sir. At least I don't th-think so," the youth answered.

Joe turned to Bill. "Better get him to the hospital for a checkup. I'll stay here and find out what I can."

Bill Gruman helped the boy into the patrol car. As it pulled away, Joe looked over the surrounding faces. "Any witnesses?" he asked.

"I saw it all, officer," declared a woman. "Hit-and-run case. A dark blue sedan that kept on speeding down the street—that way." She pointed.

"Hope you catch the guy," muttered an old man leaning on his cane. "No damned excuse for such heartless action. Heartless!"

"What kind of car was it?" Joe asked.

"A new Lumina," answered a middle-aged man in a tan trenchcoat. "You sure?"

"Absolutely! I'm a car dealer. It was a brand-new Chevy Lumina, model LS. It happened so fast I didn't get the license number. But it pulled into the parking lot down the street, the one behind Marino's Casino. It hasn't come out again. The guy had a woman in the front seat beside him. Here's my card, if you need me as a witness."

Officer Joe Patillo sprinted to the parking lot. Sure enough, of the seven cars parked there, one was a Lumina. Its motor was still warm, its right fender dented. He went in the casino's back door. In response to his question the owner replied, "Yes, only seven couples here now. Business doesn't pick up till later in the evening."

Patillo surveyed the layout. Four of the wives were feeding quarters into slot machines; the other three were trying their luck at blackjack. Two husbands were at the crap table; another was betting heavily at roulette, while four others looked on. One of the latter remarked, "That Mr. Parker is having an unbelievable streak of luck! A few more like that last and he'll break the bank."

Joe called each of the gamblers aside and asked their names, make of car, and (for the men) profession. One man was a chemist. Since hus-

bands and wives were separated, his information accumulated as bits and pieces. Within a brief time this is what he learned:

(1) Three of the men—Arthur, Bertram (who isn't Mr. Robbins), and Charles (who doesn't own the Honda)—include the husband of Julia (whose husband doesn't drive the Jaguar), Mr. Ulrich, and the banker. None of them arrived in the Monte Carlo.

(2) Helen, Laura, and Maria are married to Edward (who is neither the owner of the gift shop nor the owner of the Lumina), Mr. Taggert (who doesn't own the Jaguar), and the driver of the Nova. None of the three men is the florist.

(3) Frank, the gift shop owner, and the driver of the Honda are Mr. Stanley, Mr. Ulrich, and Mr. Robbins (who doesn't own the Imperial). None of the three is married to Nora.

(4) The artist, banker, and doctor include George (who isn't Mr. Taggert), Nora's husband, and Mr. Quigley.

(5) The Cutlass, the Nova, and the Monte Carlo (which isn't Mr. Robbins' car) belong to Helen's husband, Mr. Olmstead, and the editor (who is not married to Irene). Arthur and Donald do not own any of these cars.

(6) Neither Bertram nor Donald is Nora's husband or Mr. Olmstead, and none of the four owns the Honda.

(7) George's wife is neither Irene nor Kathy.

(8) Neither Helen nor Maria is married to the artist.

Closing his notebook, Officer Joe Patillo knew which man was the hit-and-run driver who drove the Lumina. Tapping him on the shoulder he said, "You are under arrest. You have the right . . ."

*Who was the heartless man who went to the casino just after hitting a young boy on a bicycle?*

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See page 139 for the solution to the September puzzle.

# MISSOLOGHI

Walter Satterthwait



Illustration by David Fielding





*When we two parted  
In silence and tears,  
Half broken-hearted,  
To sever for years,  
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,  
Colder thy kiss . . .*

LORD BYRON

**T**he rains, finally, had stopped. All winter long, as the wet, ragged winds flailed at the rooftop, the Poet had longed for the Greek sunlight, for its warmth, its improbable clarity, its impossible promise. Now, with his flesh scorched by fever, his blood become acid in his veins, the light fell upon him like a hammer.

Clarity and promise lingered beyond the still-shuttered windows, while here in the room darkness prevailed. Exactly the opposite, he had at some point decided, of the way things had long ago been arranged in England.

Still, there were diversions to be enjoyed among these febrile Greek shadows.

Sometimes, for example, the room moved. It would billow outward, toward the unseen horizon, the unseen blue sky—an enormous heart slowly pulsing, he at its center, like the memory of a lover—and then slowly it would clench, contract, until the walls shuddered against his taut sheets, his trembling skin.

Sometimes, too, he saw things.

Sometimes these were blessings: an arc of familiar cheek; a spill of familiar hair; a long familiar swell of alabaster thigh, a vision so sweet it would leave him lying there breathless and aching, his spine suddenly molten.

Sometimes they were horrors: gnarled thorny hands, groping, grasping; vast looming outlandish faces, red eyes screwed into furious slits, blistered lips snarling back from putrefying black teeth.

Sometimes, and grateful for it, he wandered, he drifted, and curiously, on these wanderings he seldom found himself in Greece, with its sun and its rocks and its brave, bickering revolutionaries. Almost always he found himself back in Venice, strolling down dark narrow alleyways between ruined towers, his arm locked within Maria's, or lying beside her, the towers silently gliding by as their gondola slipped dreamlike along a cool green canal.

Red lips untouched by rouge. Almond-shaped eyes, irises so dark the pupils disappeared. Hair as black as ravens' wings, tumbling to square, bare, scented shoulders . . .

Her slender hand settling at the back of his neck, like a door closing to muffle the swelter of a summer afternoon . . .

Her voice: low and throaty, as soft as smoke. "*Caro mio . . .*"



And now a cool touch upon his forehead.

No. Impossible.

The Poet opened his eyes.

Victor, sitting in the bedside chair, damp towel in hand, looking as splendid as if he had stepped, only a moment before, from the lawn of his Knightsbridge townhouse. Silken collar open, silken sleeves rolled back, a lock of brown hair curling from each aristocratic temple. Very dashing indeed for a wet nurse.

Victor smiled. "Good morning, George."

"Victor." His voice was frayed, rasping; not his own. He cleared it, and then, with an effort of will, an aged magician swirling on a cape, he wrapped the cloak of consciousness about himself. He could on occasion still pull off the trick, but with every performance, slowly, inevitably, the cloak was growing more threadbare and tattered. "Good morning." Better. "I was thinking of Maria."

"You called out her name."

"Did I? How very boring. First my legs, then my bowels. Now even my speech has gone antic on me."

Leaning forward, Victor stroked the towel against his cheek. "I've brought your broth." He nodded to the bowl on the nightstand, beside the earthenware basin.

Surrendering to the towel's damp, rough comfort, the Poet closed his eyes. "Broth. Delightful."

"You must regain your strength."

"Yes, of course. No one likes a feeble corpse."

"Nonsense. We'll soon have you back on your feet."

"Ah, Victor. And who speaks nonsense now?"

He opened his eyes, saw the sadness, and the knowledge, in Victor's eyes before their glance skipped away. "Who did it, do you suppose? To Maria."

Victor frowned. "The count, we always believed."

"Always believed, yes. But in retrospect, you know, I'd like to think that I chose my contessas rather more carefully than that. Do you remember the rumors we heard? Of a British spy working against the Carbonari?"

Victor smiled. "I remember thinking that you ascribed somewhat more malice to the British government than was perhaps reasonable." He held out the spoon.

"Open up."

Absurd. Bed-fed, spoon-fed, like a puling infant. "I suspect that it would be impossible, in the circumstances, to ascribe too much malice to the British government. They hate no one so much as revolutionaries. With the possible exception of poets." He smiled. "I'm a particular delight to them, I'm sure—a poet stumbling through the Greek revolution."

"Open up."

A bit of grace required here. For Victor's sake. The Poet opened his



mouth, accepted the spoonful of broth, swallowed it. "Lovely," he said. "The chef has outdone himself."

"Another," said relentless Victor, spoon poised like a dagger.

"Maria's father," said the Poet, "was the head of the local Lodge. The incident destroyed him. What better way to cripple the Carbonari? Paralyze its leader, and with no one the wiser?"

"Open up."

"Do you remember Pritchard, that little swine at the consulate?"

"Pritchard? A nonentity."

"I never trusted him."

"*Caro mio* . . ."

That perfect chin, that flawless skin. Those eyes . . .

. . . those black eyes, their lids slightly parted, staring up at the ruined roof of the empty warehouse . . .

"George?" Victor said, concern tightening his face.

The Poet tugged the cloak more tightly about himself. Drifting off, drifting off. Very bad form. "Yes, yes." He swallowed more broth. "And there were the weapons, remember. The French muskets."

"It was a long time ago, George."

"Surely, Victor, you've realized by now that time doesn't pass. People do."

He felt it then, the first breath of fever, a sensation almost pleasant, a desert breeze gently flickering along his dry skin.

He licked his lips. "She was very beautiful, wasn't she?"

"Very beautiful. Open up."

More broth. "And passionate." The breeze was growing in strength, leaching away his own.

Victor smiled. "They were all passionate, George."

"I don't mean passionate about me. Passionate about . . . Venice. Passionate about . . ."

"George?"

A sudden gust. The Poet toppled backward, downward, as the cloak ripped itself from his shoulders and went flapping, batlike, off into the night.

Sometimes on summer nights, when the tall windows of the room were thrown open to let in the cool air from the canal, bats would flap through them and flutter for a time up there in the shadows at the rafters.

Tonight, once again, the bats are fluttering. Beneath, in the pale yellow lamplight, the three of them sit plotting. On the table before them an empty bottle of Chianti from the count's estates, a silver salver of cheese and grapes, a porcelain platter still holding a few scraps of *carpaccio*. Conspirators ate well in those days.

"Of course you cannot come, *caro mio*," says Maria. Sitting beside him, she is wearing her famous disguise, a man's rough cotton shirt tucked



into baggy woolen pantaloons, these tucked into battered workman's boots; and, with her hair still unbound, ebony and silk, no individual in the history of human labor has ever looked less like a workman. "They are French," she says. "They will shoot you, an Englishman, on sight."

"She's quite right, you know," says Victor, smiling over the snifter of brandy he holds lightly to his chest. He is sprawled back in the chair, elbows braced along its padded arms, the heels of his supple black leather boots propped up on the low table.

"It's so damnably dangerous," says the Poet.

"Not at all," says she, with galling conviction. "I know these men, and they know me."

"But I ought to go," he says. "It's *my* bloody money, after all." He hears the petulance in his voice but he cannot recant it, would not if he could. Maddening woman.

Maria is smiling. "You will get good value for your British pounds."

He feels his back go icy stiff. "That is nothing like what I meant to say, and you know it."

She places her hand upon his knee. "I do know, my sweet. It will all go well, I promise you." Of its own accord, treacherous thing, his back begins to thaw. And she senses this, for with the ease of a mother turning from the reassured child, she lifts her hand and begins to arrange her hair, drawing it back behind her perfect ears.

Watching her, head bent slightly forward; slender fingers confidently twining through that thicket of black, he realizes that no matter what happens tonight, or tomorrow, or indeed throughout the rest of time, he will remember this image until the day arrives when he can no longer remember anything at all. It is an infuriating prospect.

She turns to Victor, smiling once again. A tendril escapes her fingers, flutters to her cheek. "And you will be having an assignation? With your Austrian tart?"

Victor smiles, sips at his brandy. "Hardly a tart, you know. Sister to one of the colonel's aides."

"Consorting with the enemy, is it?" She strokes the tendril back behind her ear.

Lightly, Victor waves the snifter. "Boring from within, I prefer to think." Her smile is teasing. "And from without as well?"

He shrugs. "A gentleman would never."

"I've met the woman," says the Poet, who, despite his affection for both of them, and his concern for her safety, has begun to feel uncomfortably like a audience. "Used in connection with her, possibly no word is more apt than 'boring.'"

Victor laughs. "But she does possess certain admirable qualities, George. She simply tends to conceal them."

"Extremely well."

"Men," says Maria, and sniffs. Holding her hair back behind her neck



with her right hand, with her left hand she lifts from the sofa a wide-brimmed felt hat, black and limp. "How you must speak of me when I am gone." With a flourish she sweeps the hat over her hair. She pulls it into place and then turns to the Poet and, like a child, she cocks her head and smiles. "Yes?"

"Preposterous," he says. "Only a blind man would be duped."

"It is intended to dupe no one." She rises, strides to the mirror, the farcical boots thumping against the carpet. Peering critically into the glass she says, "The guards at the canal have been bribed." She tucks an errant strand up into the hat. "The costume is merely a sop to their conscience."

"Maria—" the Poet begins.

She turns to him suddenly, her chin raised. It is one of her operative moments. "I must go now, *caro*," she tells him.

"I believe I ought to be leaving myself," says Victor, and pulls himself languidly to his feet. "I'll walk you to the canal," he tells Maria.

The Poet stands. "My responsibility, I think."

She rolls her eyes, more opera. "*Must* you be so childish?" She looks at Victor. "Both of you?" She walks over to the Poet, and even the absurd sound of those boots, clomp, clomp, does nothing to soothe him. There is no room for comedy here. She takes his hand. "*Caro*, I was in helping the Lodge long before you arrived in Venice. They trust me. My father trusts me. How is it that you cannot?"

He tries for lightness: "I trust you implicitly, my dear. It's these French friends of yours whom I find a trifle dubious. I've always found the French a trifle dubious."

"I told you, we have dealt with them before. All will be well." She leans forward, kisses him on the cheek. He smells her familiar scent, rose petals in the moonlight. "Three hours," she says. "Giuseppe and I will bring the weapons to the warehouse on Murano, and I'll return here immediately."

"See that you do."

She laughs, her dark eyes beneath the hat's brim suddenly catching a gleam from the lamp. "Yes, my lord and master."

He smiles ruefully. "Would that I were."

She squeezes his hand. "If you were, *caro*, you should tire of me within a day." Once more she kisses his cheek. "Until later, then." She lets his hand fall and turns to Victor. "Best of luck," she says, "with the tart."

Victor smiles. "I'll give her your regards."

Almost, the Poet reaches out for her, but she is moving away, her scent already becoming a memory behind her. The two of them, he and Victor, stand there in the flickering yellow lamplight, watching her stride off into the shadows. After a glance back at them, another smile, she disappears through the door, pulling it shut behind her.

Victor turns to him. "She'll be fine. As she says, she's done this before."

The Poet nods.

"Brandy?" says Victor.



"God yes."

The room was flickering now, pale yellow in the candlelight, time had passed again as it always does, despite his hopeful lie to Victor, despite the hopeless lies he tells himself. Voices, shuttered and muffled, scurried over him; he could sense the furry pressure of them along the surface of his skin. Something was gnawing at his arm.

He realized with a small start that his eyes were open and that he was gazing at the distant gray ceiling, that he had been gazing at it, blankly, for quite some time. The wind had hurled him here, back into his sodden bed.

And then he saw them: one on either side of him, hovering like crones over a cauldron, muttering, murmuring. He could not make out what it was they said, he could not distinguish the individual words; he could only feel the prickle the words made as they fell upon his flesh. With an effort he moved his head and looked down, and he saw, at his side, in the hollow of his white, extended arm, a thin black worm sluggishly writhing. Beneath it lay a shallow metal basin half filled with ink.

And then he understood. The doctors. The incubi. They were bleeding him again.

Soon there would be nothing left. An empty husk, dry and wizened, the castaway peel of some worthless fruit.

Above him the doctors muttered. Double double toil and trouble.

Ink pattered, drip drop, drip drop, into the basin.

Every drop a word? A line? A stanza? They had taken enough to complete an epic.

*Who?* Who could have done it?

Pritchard. Something about Pritchard.

The wind rose again, blasting, scalding, sweeping up the debris, the refuse, tattered scraps of unwritten manuscript, discarded husks of hope, of memory . . .

The brandy has done its work. It has beaten Time into submission, flattened it, leveled its peaks and valleys. He sits there in the lamplight, his back slumped against the sofa, his head precarious atop the stalk of neck. Victor is long gone, off somewhere with his pretty, boring little Austrian.

And that was . . . when? An hour ago? Two?

A sound at the door. He pulls himself to his feet, wavers there for a moment, and all at once he is afraid to permit his heart to begin its beat again. Perhaps, even then, a part of him knows.

Smiling Victor saunters in, his eyebrow raised. "Rather the worse for wear, are we, George?"

The Poet lowers himself back down. "Italian brandy. Wretched stuff."

Victor glances around the room. "Maria? She's in bed?"

He shakes his head, moving it with more violence than he had intend-





ed. His brain is sloshing about in there, thick lump of clay in turgid water. "Hasn't returned yet."

Victor frowns. When he speaks, he does so slowly as though to an idiot. "But George. It's gone midnight already."

"Midnight?" Impossible.

Victor is still attempting to be reasonable. "Giuseppe, George? Has Giuseppe returned?"

A sudden chill envelopes his back. All at once his head is clear, and it is ringing. He stands. "Murano," he says. "The warehouse."

... A fumble into his coat, a race out of the house and into the street, a scramble down the alleyways, moonlight gleaming on the cobblestones, on bits of refuse, on the slick slithering tail of a scurrying rat. Around him the smell of brine and stale urine and rotten fruit. He stumbles, trips, nearly falls. Victor is there, his hand steady and strong beneath the Poet's arm. ... A boat bobbing at the quay, a handful of lire shoved at the reluctant gondolier, a clamber over the side of the boat, and they are off. But so slowly, so slowly, the whisper of the water mocking as they inch from the canal into the expanse of black, bleak, moonlit lagoon ...

"Do you know the warehouse?" Victor asks him.

"Yes. Her uncle's. On the west side of the island."

Victor, his Italian far the better, snaps directions at the gondolier.

An infinity passes. He has time to remember everything that has happened between them, and to imagine everything that might have happened to her now ...

Landfall, a flight up the pathway, around rotting coils of rope wet from the afternoon's brief but bitter rain. His head is foggy again, the brandy. Panting, he focuses on Victor's boots ahead, mottled with muck at heel and ankle, pale brown and darker brown against the black leather. Again he nearly falls.

The dark walls of the warehouse tower over them. The double doors have been left thrown open. Just outside them, unmoving, a shadow lies atop the ground. Victor squats beside it and makes a small hissing sound. He turns to the Poet. "Giuseppe. He's dead." He stands, and for a moment the two of them stare at the open door, stare into the darkness that awaits them. "George," says Victor. "We must go for help."

Without a word, without a thought, without a hope, the Poet steps toward the door.

The building's far-off wooden ceiling has collapsed in places, leaving huge rents open to the sky, some rimmed with great fangs of splintered beam. Shafts of moonlight fall from the rents to heaps of rubble on the earthen floor, brick, stone, shards and chunks of shattered glass. She is lying upon one such heap, her arms and legs outstretched as though she had been hurled there, like a doll. Beneath her breasts, along the cotton shirt, a patch of cruel black has blossomed. Her eyes are slightly opened, her lips slightly parted. She looks as though she were smiling. She looks—

and the thought sends a shudder through him—as though she has just made love.

There is a howling emptiness inside of him, as vast as the universe. He cannot remember kneeling, but somehow he is on his knees beside her, and he is holding her hand. The soft flesh is growing cool.

“George.” Victor’s voice comes to him from a distance. Victor’s hand touches his shoulder. “George, we must go. We must tell them. The Lodge. *George.*”

Pritchard. Pritchard. Something about Pritchard.

*“George. George, can you hear me?”*

His eyelids fluttering, the Poet suddenly returned to the bed, to the room, to Greece. Victor leaned forward anxiously, his hand gripping the Poet’s shoulder. “You were crying out. What is it? What’s wrong?”

The Poet took a deep, tattered breath. “Pritchard.” He raised his hand to Victor’s, clasped it.

“Pritchard? The consular clerk?”

He nodded, released Victor’s hand. “Yes . . . Yes. I’ve been thinking of him. Whenever I recall Maria, recall what happened, for some reason my mind has always returned to Pritchard.”

Victor smiled. “Pritchard makes for a rather unlikely spy.”

“I believe that I now understand why he has been haunting me.” He licked his lips. “Is there broth?”

“Yes, of course. I was bringing it when I heard you cry.” Victor lifted the bowl from the nightstand.

“It had rained that day,” said the Poet. “Do you remember?”

“George, it was so long ago . . .” He held out the spoon.

“The blink of an eye, Victor.” He swallowed some broth. Already the breeze was building, tugging at the corners of the cape. He would not let it take him. “By the way,” he said, “is the poison in the broth or is it in the drinking water?”

Victor’s face was suddenly perplexed, but around the handle of the spoon, his thin aristocratic fingers went white. “Poison?”

“It’s a simple question, Victor. Logically speaking, it must be in one or the other. I incline toward the broth myself. Putting poison in the broth is somehow much more the sort of thing a British spy might do.”

“George, have you lost your mind?”

A gust swept across the Poet’s face, searing it. “On the contrary,” he said. “As I say, it had rained that day. After it ended and I was walking to the palazzo, I happened to spy Pritchard in the square. He cut quite an amusing figure. He had fallen somewhere, and he was quite covered with mud. My mind, you see, by remembering Pritchard, was attempting to make a subtle sort of connection.”

“A connection,” repeated Victor.

Other winds, different winds, were beginning to howl in the distance.



"To the mud on your boots. On Murano. Mud that was black, and fresh. And mud that was lighter, and old. Mud that had been left there on your earlier visit that night. When you killed Maria."

"My God, George!"

"There had been no mud on the boots earlier, before Maria left."

"George, some mud on my boots, that hardly—"

"Spare me, Victor. I haven't time. The doctors have said again and again that they cannot understand this fever. But it isn't a fever, is it, Victor? It is, rather, the work of a British spy."

"George, we've been friends for a lifetime."

"Yes. And you have taken from me the two things I most treasured—Maria, and my conception of you. And now, of course, you are taking my life. I should think that the least you could do is answer a simple question. The broth or the drinking water?"

Victor stared.

Despite the winds that screamed around him now, snapped and flapped like monstrous flames, the Poet stared back. "*Which?*"

Victor's glance dipped. Amid the winds the Poet waited.

"The broth," said Victor.

The Poet nodded. "Yes. Well. I should like some broth, please."

"George—"

"Some broth, please, Victor. If we're going to do this, we might as well do it properly." He closed his eyes. He could no longer bear to look through them.

"George, I don't expect you to understand this. But everything I've done, everything, I've done for my country."

"Oh, but I do understand." He opened his eyes. "That is precisely why I insist upon the broth. *Do it*, Victor."

Victor sat back. The winds screamed and shrieked as he dipped the spoon into the bowl, raised it, brought it toward the Poet. His hand was shaking. The Poet raised his head, moved his mouth toward the spoon, but

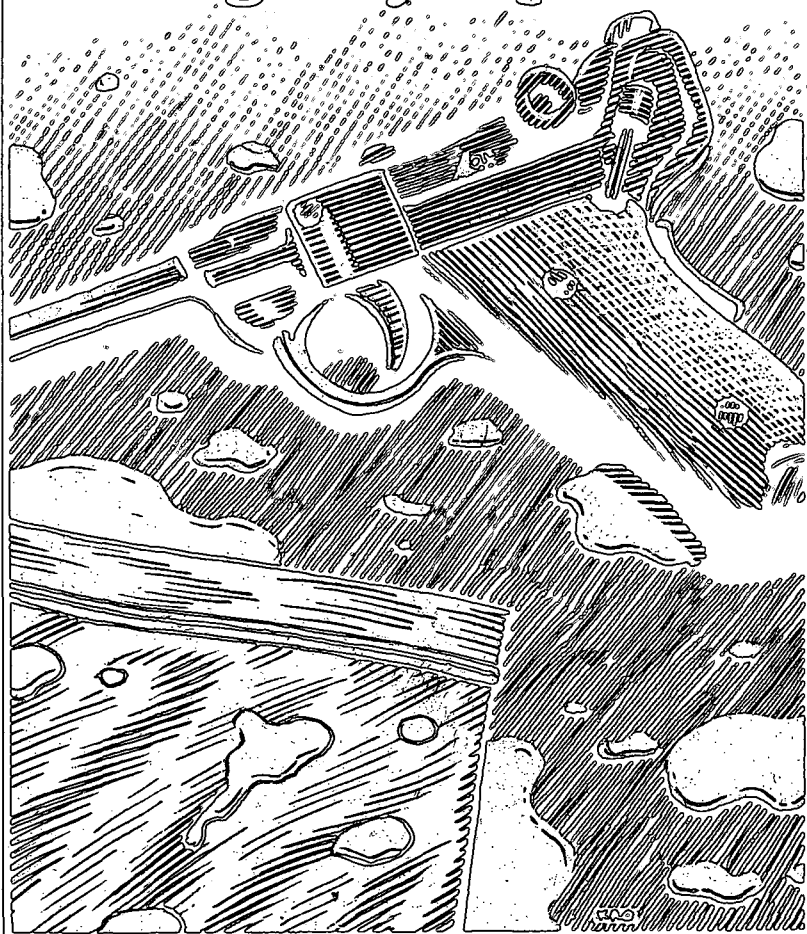
from deep within the blackness, beyond the scalding gales, lights flickered and flared, sometimes candles and sometimes lamps, and sometimes even suns, Northern and Southern, and he was whirling, spinning through them all, and then tumbling windblown through clammy English mists and booming Greek thunderstorms and sultry Venetian evenings and

Ah, at last . . .

*watching her, head bent slightly forward, slender white fingers confidently twining through that thicket of black, he realizes that no matter what happens tonight, or tomorrow, or indeed throughout the rest of time, he will remember this image until the day arrives when he can no longer remember anything at all.*

# Hitler, Elvis, and Me

Doug Allyn



'T was a month before Christmas, and all through the Delmore not a creature—well, actually one creature was stirring. Philly Lacey, a blocky, dreadlocked musician from Grand Rapids was creeping down the lobby staircase, suitcase in one hand, guitar case in the other. Giving up on his neon dreams? Or had he packed them in the chipboard case with his battered Strat?

Either way the kid was late with his rent. I sympathized. Been there, done that.

Lacey was built like a blockhouse, and night clerks at the Delmore Arms don't get combat pay. I could have played dead, let him sneak past the counter. But later I'd wonder whether I'd let him skate by out of the goodness of my heart or weaseled out because he was built like a jailhouse iron pumper. I've been there, done that, too. Don't care to go there again.

"Hey, Philly, what's up? Kinda late, isn't it?"

His shoulders slumped, but at least he didn't pony for the door. Instead he trudged over to the desk, facing the music like a grownup. Which he might be someday.

"I'm movin' on, Ax. Can't find any gigs around here."

"Detroit's a tight market now," I nodded. "A few years back, the town was cookin', a hundred clubs pumpin' seven nights a week, Hitsville cuttin' platinum by kids fresh off a bus from Georgia. I was one of 'em."

"Yeah? When was that?"

"Blew in from Mississippi in '85, green as okra, playing bass in a

blues band. The group broke up, but I stayed on, jammin' around town, tending bar, whatever. Hoping. Until I dumped a motorcycle, rearranged my face, and the mirror told me it was time for a career change."

"You ever come close to makin' it?"

I eyed him a moment. He meant no offense. He needed to know.

"I did in a way; worked with people I liked, had a helluva good time. Most folks never have that much fun their whole lives."

"But you never really got anyplace, right? And now you're down to working nights in this dump."

"Temporarily. I've got a little detective agency, mostly making collections for clubs, agents, musicians, whoever. It's the only job where havin' a face like mine pays off. And I'm not the one trying to skate out the door at four in the morning."

"Look, I know I'm a little behind with the rent—"

I glanced at the monitor. "A little over six bills."

"All I got on me is busfare, Mr. Axton. You can beat the hell out of me and that's still all I'll have."

"Nobody's beatin' anybody over back rent, Philly. In my playing days the folks who own this place carried me a few times. Now Tooey's in the hospital, Greta has to run things alone, so I'm helping out nights until they can find somebody steady. Payback time, you know? So I'll be expecting a payback from you as soon as you get it together. Send installments if you want, but send it. Unless you want to see my ugly ass comin' after it."

"No, sir."

"Good. Have a nice trip, Philly. Stay in touch, hear?"

"I will, thanks, Mr. Axton, you're the bomb, man. I sure do—"

He was gone before he finished telling me what I nice guy I am. Pity. Because it was the only pay I'd get for this gig. But just because a job's a freebie doesn't mean I don't take it seriously.

As soon as the kid hit the snowy streets, I locked up, hung a BACK IN FIVE MINUTES placard on the door, and rode the rickety elevator to the ninth floor to check Lacey's ex-room.

Philly wasn't the trashing type, but in his rush to cut out he might have forgotten his stash, hash pipe, or God knows what. The Man shakes the Delmore down for fugitives on a regular basis. Finds a few, too. The last thing Greta needs is having some kid's dope turn up in a roust.

Using the master key I let myself in. Empty. And nothing's as empty as a vacant hotel room. Checked under the pillows and mattress first. Zip. Closets clear, no shoes under the bed, nothing hidden behind dresser drawers or taped under them. Medicine cabinet bare, toilet tank—damn.

A large plastic bag was nestled neatly at the bottom of the tank behind the inlet tube. Rolling up my sleeve, I reached into the tank and lifted it out.

Knew what it was as soon as I touched it. A gun. A long-barreled pistol of some sort. Double damn.

After carefully wiping my prints off the bag, I used a washcloth to carry it to the bed, popped the waterproof Baggie seal with a thumb-

nail, and dumped my find onto the faded chintz bedcover.

Whoa! I'd never actually seen one up close and personal, but I recognized it instantly. A German Luger, weapon of choice for every movie villain since the thirties, cold, black and deadly.

This one differed from the usual movie prop, though. Barrel was longer, for one thing, ten inches or so, and the frame was ornately engraved with filigree and an inscription. Kneeling, I tried to read it. German, naturally.

"Nussink," I muttered. "I know nuss-ink!"

Checked the magazine. Empty. Immaculate, in fact. I doubt it had ever been loaded. Or fired. The Luger looked showroom new, but it couldn't be. The checkered ivory grips had yellowed with age, taking on a wonderful patina. I'm no gun freak, but I know beauty when I see it. This was machinery elevated to another level, sleek and Teutonic as Marlene Dietrich in her prime.

So what was a kid from Grand Rapids doing with it? Sticking up 7-Elevens? Not likely. Philly'd been looking hard for gigs, auditioning, sitting in around town. I'd given him a few phone numbers, but nothing happened for him. No surprise. Music's corporate now. Studios want programmers, not players.

No stickup guy would use this thing anyway. The piece was too bulky to pack and too pretty to shoot. Strictly a decorator. And more than likely, slightly hot.

Which was a problem. I couldn't prove the kid had dumped it, the Delmore is already on the Detroit



P.D.'s short list, and possessing an unregistered firearm is an automatic two-year felony in Michigan.

Solution? Lose it. Quick. Preferably at a profit.

Made a few calls and arranged to meet a bud at a Shoney's truck stop in Dearborn just off I-94. Tony Tallman's name suits him. Six four with a black shoulder-length mane, he's an Odawa from Marquette and works at the look, flannel shirt, o.d. pants tucked into steel-toed jump boots. Bear claw necklace. A face like Tony's is probably the last thing Custer ever saw.

He was in a corner booth at the back of the restaurant, away from other customers. We rapped fists for hello, then I slid in across from him, parking the briefcase on the floor beside me.

"Hey, Axton, how you been?"

"Good, Tony, but I'm working nights. Let's get to the biz before I nod out. You still making the Motown to Miami run for Generous Motors?"

"Twice a week. Baltimore in between. Why?"

"I got some merch to move. South Florida sounds right."

"Why Florida?"

"It's gun country, loose laws, a lot of collectors." I slid the briefcase across to him. "Take a look."

He glanced casually around the dining room; nobody was paying attention to us. Shielding the case with his torso, he popped the lid, eyed it a moment, then nodded.

"Nice. Navy Luger, P '08 model, 9 millimeter." He hefted it, checking the balance. "Original or a reproduction?"

"I don't know. How can you tell?"

"The finish. Old bluing has a softer luster and . . ." He hesitated, staring at the gun, puzzled. Sliding it back into the case, he wiped his hands on his dungarees.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't know, something . . . Where'd you get this thing?"

"Some hump dumped it at the Delmore for back rent, swear to God."

"How much back rent?"

"A few hundred, why?"

"If it's a reproduction, it's worth a few yards. If it's original, and I think it is, we're talkin' five, six grand, maybe more."

"Sixty-forty to you?"

"Maybe. There's somethin' wrong about this piece."

"You mean it's fake?"

"No, I'm pretty sure it's the real deal. Bluing's right; the grips are definitely ivory, and you can't get the real thing any more."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know," Tony shook his head slowly, bemused at his own confusion. "Ever feel like somebody stepped on your grave? I got a jolt from that piece that felt like an eighteen-wheeler backed over mine."

"A truck? Terrific. What are you givin' me, man? Some Indian medicine thing?"

"What do I know from medicine? I'm Lutheran, for chrissake. I'm just saying I got a bad feeling about it."

"Get a grip. It's never even been fired."

"Hey, Ax, I know it's stupid, but I didn't live this long by dumpin' on

my hunches. Somethin's up with this piece. You want me to deal it, fine, but I want to know more about it first. Provenance, collectors call it. If it's righteous, we'll twitch the split, sixty-forty to you for your trouble. You're some kind of detective, right? So detect. Call me when you got somethin'. Or don't."

As I was driving back to the Delmore, it occurred to me that Tony was half right. There was definitely something wrong about the piece, but it wasn't a mystical eighteen-wheeler.

The problem was the provenance he'd mentioned. Bottom line, if the Luger were worth a couple of yards minimum, why would Philly Lacey leave it behind? He was sneaking out anyway, why not carry the gun, too?

Because it was hot? Then why leave it in the one place where it could be traced to him? Why not just pitch it in the nearest dumpster?

Answer: Philly didn't ditch the piece. Someone else had. Most likely a previous tenant.

I found Greta behind the registration counter, asleep on her feet after catnapping in a chair beside Tooeys's bed all night. I sent her around the corner to Starbuck's for some caramel mocha and a breather. She was so grateful I felt like dog dump for using her exhaustion to backcheck the occupants of Room 914. Most recently, Philly Lacey and before him . . .

Janeen M. Husted, 419 Cherry-mist Drive, Rochester Hills. Half an hour away by freeway? Ah, checked

in at eleven A.M., no checkout time. A nooner. Lunch hour love or something like it. An unlikely candidate for stashing pistols in toilet tanks.

Before Husted? Rashaan Ali Salameh, a Lebanese from Beirut. Stayed at the Delmore two days before moving on. If I bought into profiling, Rashaan should be my guy, a transient Arab. Terrorist, right?

But I remembered Salameh, had checked him in myself. A Detroit Metro taxi brought him straight from the airport with the customs stickers still on his luggage. And since airport security types really are into profiling, there's no way a Lebanese national could smuggle a bulky pistol through security. Which let Rashaan off the hook, too.

That left . . . nobody. The room had been unoccupied for a month before Salameh, and the gun couldn't have been there more than a week or two.

When in doubt, scout. Using a borrowed code card, I logged onto the Law Enforcement Information Net and ran all three names. Philly Lacey, a pot bust a year earlier, paid a fine, drew no time. No arrests since, no wants or warrants. Rashaan Ali Salameh . . . with no credit I.D., three Rashaans came up, one doing double life in Milan, the other two out-of-staters. None of them could be my guy.

I ran his passport number. Got a hit. It listed Detroit Metro as his port of exit five days ago. Home to Beirut. Dead end. If Rashaan had dumped the gun, I doubted he'd talk to me about it over a long distance line.

Ran Janeen M. Husted . . . sweet

Jesus Jenny on a bike! Multiple hits. Convictions for burglary, firearms possession, and robbery while armed, four years in Coldwater. Paroled seven months ago. No current wants or warrants but I'd just found my candidate—

"What are you doing?" Greta asked, peering over my shoulder.

"Abusing my computer privileges," I admitted, "but in a good cause. Do you remember this one?" I pulled up the notorious Janeen's pic and enlarged it.

"Yeah. A nooner but new at it. Used her real name, paid with a credit card."

"There's no checkout time."

"She didn't check out. Ran out of here like her hair was on fire. We got raided, bigtime, a swat team looking for Roland Dukes, the guy who knifed that cop over on Dequindre? I told 'em he wasn't here, but they had a hot tip, kicked in three or four doors on eight and nine. Probably scared that poor girl to death."

"Just her? What about her boyfriend?"

"Never saw him." Greta frowned. "I don't think he showed. Cops probably scared him off. Why? Who is she?"

"Just someone I'm looking up for a friend."

"She's somebody's wife, fooling around, right? I thought you didn't take divorce cases."

"If I did, I wouldn't be working nights for you. What makes you think she's married?"

"Because she was so green about it all. She even came back a few days later, asked for the same room

but Lacey was in it by then. Besides, she looked very . . . elegant. That picture doesn't do her justice."

"It's a five-year-old booking picture, Greta. She did time for armed robbery."

"Get outa here! That girl? I thought she was some society type from Grosse Pointe with a rich hubby in *Who's Who*."

"Nope. But she's definitely got me wondering what's what."

Hardtime ex-con or not, she was an amateur at office flings. Office couples looking to love their lunch hour away at the Delmore are an everyday affair, no pun intended. They pay cash, never show identification, and list phony license plate numbers. Janeen left a trail a beagle with a head cold could follow. Or a part-time night clerk.

Using her charge card number I called up her current credit status: nearly broke; no surprise, since she'd only been out of jail seven months. What was surprising was her current job.

Janeen Husted, presently on parole for burglary and robbery while armed, was listed as employed at the Bondurant Metropolitan Museum of Grosse Pointe. In what position? I couldn't imagine.

So I thought I'd ask.

The BMMGP is housed in the former Bondurant estate in Grosse Pointe, four multilevel flat-roofed buildings with glass walls bordered by Arkansas stack-stone fountains and swooping enclosed ramps that soar up from the parking lot below.

I'd actually worn a topcoat and a tie. Don't know why I bothered.

Most of the patrons were U. of Detroit students dressed like street people.

A quick scan of the video program at the entrance: "Manet et la Monde Nouvelle," "Krieg Kunst—Masterworks of Browning, Borchardt and Their Contemporaries," "Auto-erotica: Sensuality in the Designs of Raymond Loewy." Whoop-ee.

Clueless, I began drifting through the exhibits, keeping a weather eye out for Janeen Husted.

The Manet display was French art depicting . . . colorful stuff. Baffling to me, but then they like Jerry Lewis. And snails.

I drifted along with a crowd of college kids up a glass tunnel to the next building, the auto-erotica exhibit. Starlets enjoying themselves in roadsters? Hardly. It was a collection of airy engineering drawings, most of which seemed to be cars.

Leaving the kids to ooh, aah, and take notes, I wandered up the next ramp alone, stepped through a doorway and found myself staring down a gun muzzle. A cannon, in fact. An honest-to-God automatic anti-aircraft gun. Designed by John Browning, the placard said. Glass-fronted display cases were filled floor to ceiling with firearms, most of them magnificently engraved with gold or silver filigree—rifles, shotguns, revolvers . . . and there it was.

I was drawn across the carpeted room by a magnet of a display. Five Luger automatics were arranged in a circle on green felt. In the center of the group was the handsomest weapon of all. Mine. Or its twin brother.

Leaning closer, I read the placard below. "Luger '08 Naval Model, presented by Admiral Erich Raeder to Chancellor Adolf Hitler, July 1936, in commemoration of the launching of the battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst*. Acquired from the Elvis Aron Presley Graceland Collection in 1971 by Robert Bondurant, curator 1959 to 1974."

Elvis? And Hitler? The gun—I sensed someone approaching and edged to my right, feigning interest in a rack of engraved bolt action rifles.

"Fascinating pieces, aren't they?" He was a compactly built man, five eight or so, wearing a gray vested suit that cost more than my car. Narrow face, heavy brows, wavy David Niven curls dyed chestnut with a sliver of silver at his temples.

"Uh, yeah. Pretty cool stuff."

"You seemed quite interested in the Luger display."

"Not really. I'm just surprised that Elvis owned 'em."

"Actually, Mr. Presley was quite an avid collector, both of firearms and edged weapons. His commissions helped foster interest in the work of more recent artisans such as Gilbert Hibben and others."

"No kidding? I thought he was just a singer—you know, "Hound Dog," "Don't Be Cruel," and all that?"

"Of course. Well, if you have any questions, feel free to consult our staff. Excuse me."

He bustled off, not bothering to hide his disdain. And annoyance. He'd probably have to disinfect his sleeve where it had brushed my coat.

No matter. The main reason for my visit to the Bondurant was sitting at a desk in an open office in a far corner of the room. After glancing around to be sure we were alone, I rapped lightly on her door. She glanced up.

Greta was right, she didn't look much like her booking picture any more. A small woman with blonde close-cropped hair worn in a page-boy, she looked every bit the suburban socialite, subdued navy dress with a sweater draped artfully over her shoulders, clunky Doc Martens shoes. And ice-gray eyes that could see a thousand yards.

"Janeen Husted?"

"That's right. Can I help you?"

"Maybe we can help each other. I believe I have something of yours. From the Delmore Arms."

She didn't even blink, continued reading me with those liquid eyes. "You're not the law," she said at last.

"No, ma'am, I'm private. My name's Axton, R. B." I showed her my investigator's license. She read every word of it. Carefully.

"What is it you want, Mr.—"

"Axton. My friends call me Ax. And what I don't want is trouble, for you or from you. We've got a situation, but it's nothing we can't work out. Where can we talk?"

"Not here. Do you know Papa Grappa's in Greektown?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Three?"

"Works for me. But don't be late."

She wasn't. I staked out the restaurant forty minutes early, watching it from a parking lot across the street on the off chance that my

date might send a kneecapper in her place.

Instead she pulled into the lot five minutes after I did in a battered Volvo, parked behind a snowdrift two rows up, and settled in to wait and watch. Exactly as I was.

I gave it five minutes, then tapped my horn twice. Our eyes met in her rear view mirror. I trudged over to her car.

"Hi. You're not a very trusting lady."

"Would you trust somebody who looked like you?"

"No, ma'am. But now that we've established that neither of us is an amateur, can we talk?"

"Do you mind if I drive? I think better behind the wheel."

"Do you?" I said, climbing in. "Is that why you drove for your boyfriend when he held up the NBD branch in Inkster?"

"I was young, stoned, and in love," she said coolly, guiding the Volvo into early afternoon traffic. "What's your excuse?"

"For what?"

"Your face. Car wreck? Or did somebody remodel you?"

"Motorcycle accident. I've got your Luger."

"Good for you. Do have a figure in mind?"

"It's not that simple. I need to know what's up."

"No you don't. Look, Mr. Axton—  
"Ax."

"Whatever. Trust me, you don't want to deal yourself into this. Take the money and run."

"I can't. I'm already involved in whatever's going on. If it breaks bad, do you think the law will believe I

didn't know diddly? Or believe the first hump who offers to swap me for a reduced sentence?"

"You're not a very trusting sort either."

"Nobody loves me but my mama and she could be jivin', too."

"What?"

"It's a song. B. B. King. Look, Jaaneen, here's how it is. I've got the piece, which leaves you with exactly two options. Tell me what's up so we can work out a deal that protects me and mine. Or don't tell me, in which case the gun goes straight to the law."

"You won't make a dime that way."

"I won't be making license plates either. What's it gonna be?"

She didn't answer for a mile or two. I passed the time counting the new VeeDubs on Woodward. Bright as gumdrops. A green. Two reds and a yellow—

"I don't know what's going on," she said slowly. "In the slam I knew people who couldn't take it on the outside any more. Needed prison, the discipline, to stay sane."

"Institutionalized, you mean?"

"Yeah. I'm wondering if it's happened to me. Lately nothing seems to make much sense."

"Then you've got nothing to lose. Tell me."

"I did four years in Coldwater, the last two on work release, mopping floors at a Wal-Mart at night. I thought it would be better when I got out, but I couldn't find any kind of a job. Applications all over town but no takers; meanwhile I'm still mopping floors. Then I finally caught a break. I thought. Bumped

into a guy I knew from the old days. He's the assistant curator at the museum, hired me on the spot. Eighteen bucks an hour."

"I'm missing something. How does a guy in the life wind up running a museum?"

"He marries it. His wife's a Bon-durant. Besides, he wasn't into anything heavy, we'd just seen each other around in the dance clubs, you know? Knew some people in common."

"What people?"

"Dopers," she said, glancing the challenge at me. "He smoked a little weed. So did I. So did everybody else I knew."

"So he hired you. Are you qualified for this job?"

"I am now. I worked in the prison library, and I'm a quick study. It's been great, everything I ever hoped for. Dennis helped me get charge accounts at Hudsons and Winkel-mans, showed me how to dress—"

"Dennis?"

"Mr. Garland. You were talking to him earlier."

"Actually I wasn't, but go on. And what did Dennis expect for all this help?"

"Not the wild thing, if that's what you're wondering. His wife Alise is older and a lot heavier. Dennis runs around on her, all right, but I'm not his type. You might be."

"Not yet. Okay, you've got a great job, life is Fat City, where does the gun come in?"

"After a few months he started asking me to do little favors for him, mostly deliver packages to people. Money. Ten grand here, fifteen there."



"How do you know it was money?"

"I looked. I also checked out the people I was dealing with. Two were bookies, one was Marko Rothstein."

"The loan shark from Ecorse?"

"He does sports betting, too. Poor Dennis has a jones for gambling. And he's unlucky. Two weeks ago, Rothstein and one of his goons came around. They were in his office a long time. He was scared spitless afterward."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing for a few days. Then Dennis asked me to make another delivery, but instead of dropping it off, I was supposed to meet a guy at the Delmore and give him the package."

"But this time it wasn't money?"

"No, it was the Hitler Luger. Scared the hell out of me when I realized it. If I get caught with a gun, I'm gone automatically, four more years. So I'm waiting for my contact, watching the street, when five squad cars roll up, no lights or sirens. Didn't know if they were there for me, didn't wait to find out. I stashed the gun and went out the window."

"From the ninth floor?"

"I've been in tougher spots back when I was doing burglaries. I just crawled along the ledge to a cornice, hid in the shadows until the prowler cars left, and split."

"But the Hitler Luger's back on display."

"When I came back without it, Dennis got pretty panicky, but somehow he fixed the exhibit."

"I see." And I was beginning to. "Did Garland tell you to check into the Delmore under your real name?"

"Yeah, so the contact could ask for me. Why?"

"Just wondered. So you told him about the raid, then what?"

"I thought he'd tell the contact where to pick up the package, end of problem, but he had a hairy, said I was the one who lost it, I had to recover it. I went back the next day, but the room was already rented."

"Yeah, to Philly Lacey." I shook my head slowly, smiling. "You were in the life, right? Ever hear of a Hendrix hustle?"

"What are you talking about?"

"A scam, Janeen. A Hendrix is what they call it in the music business, but this sounds like the same game. Here's how it works. Guitar collectors will pay huge bucks for some instruments, not because they are rare or special but just because some rock star played them once. A '63 Fender Stratocaster might be worth a few thousand, but if Jimi Hendrix played it on an album, the same guitar can bring three hundred grand."

"For the same guitar? That's crazy."

"No crazier than Beanie Babies or baseball cards, just more expensive. A few years ago, when the Japanese got into the collector guitar market, prices went to Mars. And before long somebody came up with a hustle. You buy a famous star's guitar, one that Hendrix, Clapton, or whoever played. Then you arrange to have it stolen, but you also make damn sure the police recover it."

"I don't get it."

"You will. The police and insurance people verify that it's the orig-

inal and return it to you, the press is all over the story, rare guitar lost and found, blah blah. Then later on, some guy offers to sell your Hendrix guitar to a shady collector. The collector knows about the theft, so he calls you to find out if you got the original back. You say sure you did, but you're very, very interested in any copies he hears about."

"I don't—" But then she did, nodding slowly. "Ahh. And because the collector's a sleaze, he figures you're lying. That the original's still missing and you're looking to buy it back?"

"Exactly. Now, if he's honest, he gives you the seller's name, and he's your own guy anyway. But more likely he pays big bucks for the copy, stashes it away, and you move on to run the scam on the next fish."

"But wouldn't the copies have to be perfect?"

"Sort of, but that's the beauty of the hustle. We're not talking about the *Mona Lisa* here. Guitars and Lugers aren't works of art, they're *things*, mass-produced by machines. If you have a piece from the right era, any competent forger can alter its serial number. After that, it literally is the same as the original. Remember, it's not valuable because it's unique, it's valuable because it belonged to some famous hotshot once and you've got the news stories to prove it. Fame's a funny thing. Whether the person was good or not, people will pay monster bucks for a piece just because it belonged to somebody . . . famous."

"My God. And that Luger was owned by Hitler *and* Elvis."

"And me," I added.

"And you," she echoed, glancing warily at me. "So, back to question one. How much do you want?"

"Same answer, it's not that simple. You see, in the hustle, the burglar either doesn't get caught at all or the owner drops charges later on. Nobody gets hurt, everybody gets what they want, even the crooked collectors. But in this case . . ."

An angry flush rose above her collar as the implications sank in. "My God, Dennis set me up, didn't he? I was supposed to get caught with the gun in that raid. He didn't hire me in spite of my record, he hired me because of it. Even if I go to the cops it's his word against mine. Who'd believe me? That bastard!"

"I'd say that covers it."

"So what do we do?"

"That depends. He needs the original Luger to make the hustle work, but as soon as he gets it back, he'll either set you up again or get rid of you and run the scam with somebody else. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Roll with me a minute. Suppose a clerk at the Delmore calls to say the room you asked about is available? If you're not around, Dennis would have to go himself, yes?"

"Where would I be?"

"Out sick, at a funeral, whatever. Gone. Any problem with that?"

"No."

"Good. Now, since I still have the real piece, the gun in the exhibit must be a duplicate. When you came back without the original, how quick did Dennis get a replacement for the display?"

"Five minutes. Maybe less. I went in the john to clean myself up, and the showcase was fixed before I was."

"He must have the duplicates stashed nearby, probably someplace in the building. Any idea where?"

"There's a strongroom for valuable artifacts in the museum basement," Janeen mused, "but I'm familiar with the stock there. Whenever Dennis gave me packets to deliver, he always got them from the safe in his office. A walk-in safe. If the dupes are in the building, that's where they'd have to be."

"I see," I said carefully. "So, Miss Husted. In your . . . professional opinion, just how good a safe is it?"

Antiques Incroyable is a garishly painted three story hock shop a few blocks east of Saginaw's old downtown district. Johnno Habash, proprietor. He's Syrian, I think. His store's in a high crime area, but nobody ever rips Johnno off. Ever.

I pressed the buzzer just after closing, and the door hummed open electronically. A man-mountain stood just inside, black, in a black suit, pristine white shirt, red skullcap, and a maroon bow tie. Street Sweeper shotgun cradled casually in the crook of his arm.

"Yo, Ax, how you been doin'?"

"Good, Mr. Bass. You?"

"Fine as frog hair. Are you packin', Ax?"

"No, but I've got pieces in this briefcase. You can check it if you like."

"No need, just so you understand you'll be pickin' up the tab for anything that goes wrong."

"Understood. Is Johnno in his office?"

"Like Mohammed on the mountain. Go ahead on."

The shop is a huge, open warehouse with its steel superstructure exposed, walls and aisles stacked with floor-to-ceiling shelving, every inch filled with an array of antiques and collectibles from Rookwood china to crosscut saws. The center of the store is dominated by a two and a half story office tower encircled with a winding, wrought-iron staircase. I took a deep breath and started up, keeping away from the railing. Pausing to pant halfway up, I scanned the room. A mistake.

I hate heights, and I was already above the second story light fixtures. A long way down. I moved on.

The top is a mesa, an elegant, open-air square girded by a tall oak railing, offering a spectacular overview of the aisles below. Johnno was sitting at an exquisitely carved Victorian desk, his feet resting on a footstool. A bloated toad of a man built like a suet block, his black suit makes him look like a toad in a tuxedo. Even his face is amphibian: bulbous eyes, petulant lips, frog-belly pallor.

"Ax," he nodded curtly. "Time's money. What you got for me?"

"Five pre-war naval Lugers, mint condition, strictly for the collector market." I placed one of the guns on the table. He glanced at it, then back at me.

"Warm, are they?"

"They're not on any hot sheets, and nobody's looking for them. But there is one small problem."

"Which is?"

"They all have the same serial number."

He digested that a moment, sucking on a tooth.

"Let me guess. Five navy Lugers with the same serial as the one from that museum heist last month?"

"It wasn't a heist exactly. The cops busted an assistant director in a cheap hotel with one of the museum's guns. He was in hock to a loan shark and was trying to peddle it. Or so they figure. The museum fired him but didn't press charges."

"I remember now. The gun belonged to Hitler once, right? But I thought the museum got that gun back."

"So they said," I acknowledged. "Of course, there's a slight possibility that they were mistaken. The gun was out of their possession for a time, and navy Lugers aren't all that uncommon. I have five of them right here, for instance, identical to the . . . mishandled gun. A reasonable person would have to admit there's a possibility that one of them could be the original."

"A possibility?"

"Right. Just a possibility."

He bobbed his squat head, mulling it over. "I might know a few people interested in buying a . . . possibility. How much?"

"Ten K apiece."

"Fifty grand? That's a lot of—"

"It isn't ten percent of what you'll get for 'em, Johnno, and I've got partners to take care of. The offer's open for the next thirty seconds, and then I'm outa here."

He glanced at his watch, a Patek Phillipe, drumming his sausage fingers on the desk for what seemed a very long time. Then shrugged. "Deal." Picking up the Luger, he hefted it, eyeing it critically. "This belonged to Hitler?"

"That's what the papers said. And later on Elvis owned it."

"No kidding? Hitler and Elvis both?"

"And me."

"No offense, Ax, but you don't exactly rank up there with Hitler and Elvis."

"Never really wanted to."

"Bull. Deep down, everyone wants to be famous."

"Funny, a kid said something like that to me awhile back. But he was wrong. Hitler and Elvis were famous, Johnno. Bottom line, would you rather be them? Or us?"

"Point taken," he nodded. "So when I deal these, you won't mind if I don't mention your name as a previous owner?"

"No," I said. "I won't mind at all."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

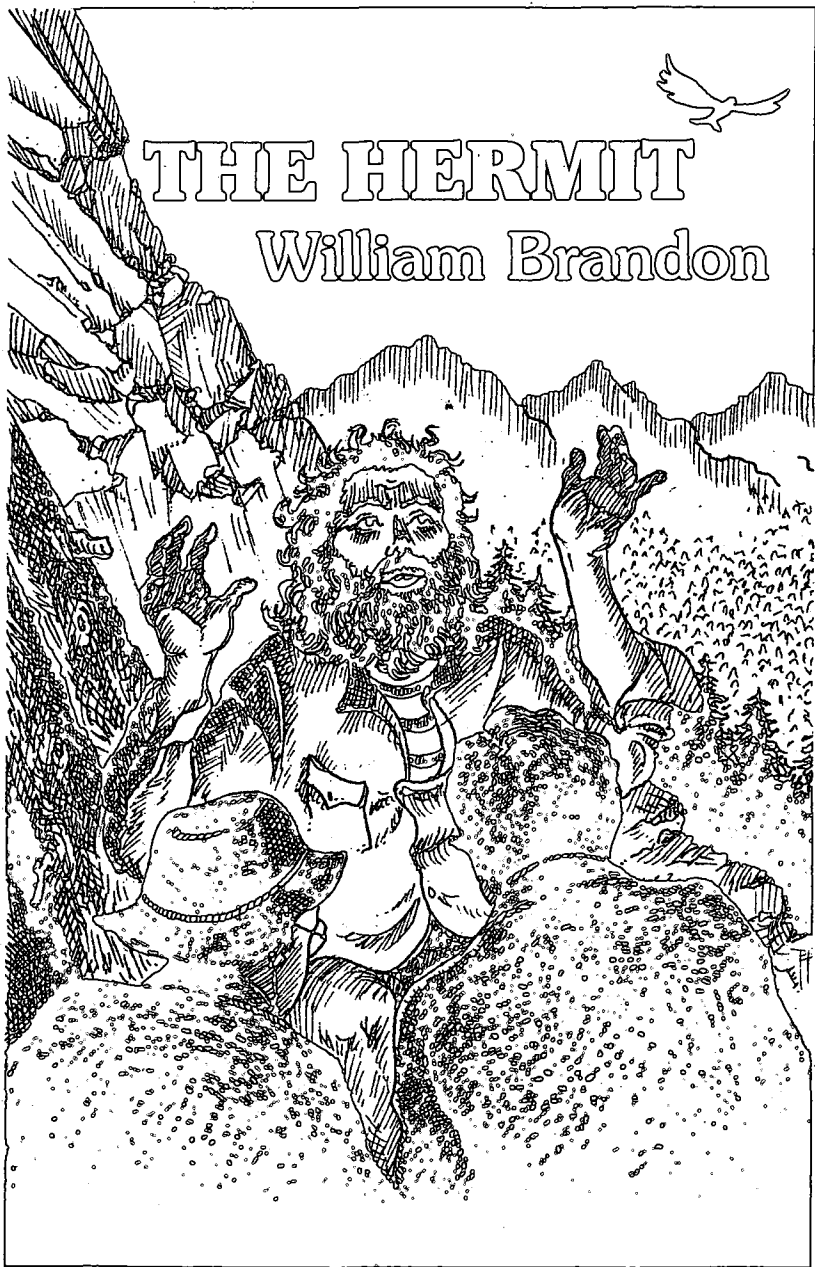


Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/00

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**A**bove the peaks a golden eagle hung as still as if nailed to the fading sky, only its hunting head in motion turning gravely from side to side.

The light of the end of day fell in a colored veil from the high crags of the mountains. In the steep fir forests of the slopes it was night, and below, in the mountain meadow where the field expedition's camp was pitched, cooking fires glowed like rubies in a dusk as thick as velvet.

"That there's my eagle," the hermit said. "Her name's Josie."

Dr. Whitaker pretended astonishment, although to keep his face straight he didn't dare glance at Dr. Bowen, his young assistant. "Is that so? Your very own eagle?"

"I'll call her," the hermit said and hurled a falsetto scream into the air. The eagle didn't respond. "She's bashful," the hermit explained.

The hermit's shack, whacked together out of uneven logs and weighed down with rocks on the roof, was dug into a grassy bench far up the canyon wall, between the dark and the daylight. The hermit had a strong smell even in the open air, and Dr. Whitaker had no desire to enter the shack.

Bob White, the Indian packer who had brought them to the hermit, sat on his heels some distance away and chewed a blade of grass.

"I've got a shrew, too," the hermit said. "You know there ain't nothing quicker than a shrew? Nobody can catch a shrew. I got a shrew comes and eats out of my hand. I call her Dolly."

"Well, I declare," Dr. Whitaker said. Behind him young Bowen had a spasm of coughing, and the hermit threw back his shaggy head like a suspicious horse. "That's extraordinary," Dr. Whitaker said, making his voice as sincere as possible. "Really extraordinary."

Reassured, the hermit said, "I got every kind of creature. Some of them comes right in my shack. I got a chipmunk and a camp robber and a whisky jay and a picket-pin and a whistling cony; he comes clear down from the rock slide yonder; and a parmigant and a whole band of elk and for that matter a big old sow bear, she comes to call quite frequently. Then, too, I got creatures nobody's scarcely heard of. This canyon's got strange creatures in it. I've got a little goat no bigger than a rabbit—once he come to see me. I wouldn't even tell folks all the creatures I keep around here, they wouldn't believe me."

"Think of that," Dr. Whitaker said, and young Bowen began to cough again and hastily moved away. "What do you do with all these animals?"

The hermit considered and said, "Mostly I give them names."

The hermit's knobby, sun-blackened face was almost indistinguishable in the rising night, but the whites of his eyes gleamed and flashed. The Indian's bright red baseball cap was turning black, and the fires in the camp below sparkled and brightened as they sank deeper into



darkness. The tall sky above appeared distended with the veins of night, and the eagle was descending in long laggardly circles.

"We've seen one of those small mountain goats ourselves," Dr. Whitaker said. "This canyon is perfectly boxed, and evidently certain ecological factors have combined with its isolation to produce pronounced modification in various faunal and floral forms."

"I reckon so," the hermit said uncertainly, and Dr. Whitaker was glad young Bowen wasn't there to hear him.

"But our little expedition isn't collecting animals. We're only hunting bones, specifically mastodon bones. That was an animal that looked rather like a fur-bearing elephant, with curving tusks and a trunk."

"Oh, them," the hermit said. "I've had a whole nest of them under my cookstove once."

Unfortunately Bowen returned to them at that moment and was not able to restrain a delighted guffaw.

"If you don't mind!" Dr. Whitaker said coldly, turning to him, and young Bowen said, "Sorry, sir. I didn't mean anything."

"I named the biggest one Sam Hill," the hermit said, his voice high and challenging, but trembling a little.

"Was he under the cookstove, too?" Bowen asked before he could stop himself.

"If you please, Bowen!" Dr. Whitaker snapped.

"Yes, he was," the hermit said defiantly. "And he was happy to be there, too."

"If you've ever happened to see any large bones," Dr. Whitaker said to the hermit, "I'd very much appreciate the information. A number of mastodon sites have been investigated on the plateau just south of this ridge. Some of the remains appear to be rather recent, perhaps only a very few thousand years old. We hoped to find even later evidences in this canyon, but so far we've been unsuccessful. Since you must know the area far better than anyone else, I was hoping you might be willing to help us."

"I ain't interested in bones," the hermit said. "I'm interested in living creatures."

"Well, well, yes," Dr. Whitaker said. "But if you should happen to see any—"

"And I ain't interested in talking to anyone at all that disbelieves me."

"Now, I'm sure no one meant—" But the hermit had vanished, as if he had dissolved in the darkness.

After the two scientists had left, picking their way down the slope behind the beam of young Bowen's flashlight, the Indian went up to the shack and said, "Hey, Dobe."

"I don't want to talk no more," the hermit's disconsolate voice said.

An immense shadow rushed past just overhead, with a single beat of wings like a muffled cough.

"Goodnight, Josie," the hermit said. "Goodnight, girl."

A streak of ivory light still clung to the topmost dome of the sky, but the shack had receded into the night. Bob White sensed that the hermit was sitting there in the doorway, and he squatted down on his heels and got out a cigarette. Something rustled in the duff at their feet.

"And here comes Dolly," the hermit said. "One goes to bed and another'n gets up."

The Indian struck a match for his cigarette, and in the flare he saw the shrew running like a gray streak back and forth over the hermit's outstretched hand. Another mouselike creature scampered up on the doörsill.

The hermit said, "There's one of them come back now," and got up and lighted a nub of candle.

In the doorway he knelt and coaxed the mastodon onto a piece of cardboard. Bob White watched, smoking. The mastodon lifted its head, and its tiny tusks gleamed like the whites of the hermit's eyes under their bristling brows. It trotted toward the hermit's hand, and the cardboard rattled in minute thunder.

"I think this'n's Sam Hill himself," the hermit said, pleased.

### **SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

The true Matthew Aldershott was wearing the brown coat, brown trousers, buckskin shoes, red necktie, and white socks.

COAT	TROUSERS	FOOTWEAR	TIE	SOCKS
tan	khaki	brown shoes	green	blue
herringbone	tan	brown boots	polkadot	argyle
brown	brown	buckskin shoes	red	white
gray	black	tan boots	floral	brown
tweed	gray	alligator shoes	blue	black
blue	blue	black boots	striped	green

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**J**effery Deaver's latest, **The Empty Chair** (Simon & Schuster, \$25), takes the quadriplegic criminologist Lincoln Rhyme and his trusty crew to a small town in North Carolina where Rhyme is scheduled to have experimental surgery. As it happens, Rhyme hits town just when a strange local kid, dubbed the Insect Boy for his obsession with bugs, has abducted two women, and the authorities plead for Rhyme's help. Using his knowledge of forensics Rhyme brilliantly tracks the teenager with the help of a local science student hurriedly added to his team. But when his lover and colleague Amelia Sachs strikes off on her own, Rhyme must track her down as well. Deaver's skill as a writer convinces us not only that Rhyme and the odd characters who people his eccentric world exist, but that they also live in such breathtakingly suspenseful times. This one's a winner. Again.

British author Val McDermid sends her intrepid ex-reporter Lindsay Gordon back to her old stomping grounds when a friend is murdered and the dead woman's former lover, Meredith, asks Lindsay for help. **Booked for Murder** (Spinsters Ink, \$12) opens with the news of bestselling author Penny Varnavides' death, apparently the victim of a freakish accident in her own home. Soon, however, the police discover that the odd death conforms to the description of a murder in Penny's upcoming book. As the book was still only a manuscript, and the manuscript was shown to only a handful of people, the police target Meredith, the jilted girlfriend, as the most likely suspect. Although her investigation is clearly placing her in the killer's sights, Lindsay is certain that the clue to the murder lies in the deceased author's powers of observation, as well as in her unrelenting sense of justice. Lindsay is sturdy and resourceful, a good woman to have in one's corner.

Lauren Henderson's heroine is the feisty and fun London bohemian artist, Sam Jones. In **Freeze My Margarita** (Crown, \$12.95), one of

*continued on page 142*

# THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Kay Ellis of Lexington, Kentucky. Honorable mentions go to Zelda C. Fairweather of Markham, Ontario, Canada; Matt Hudgins of Austin, Texas; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Nick Andreychuk of Port Moody, British Columbia, Canada;



da; H. C. Finch of Zion, Illinois; Stephanie A. Rogers of Robbinsville, New Jersey; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Anne-marie Eversmeyer of Gresham, Oregon; Hildred Jackson of Louisville, Kentucky; Ed Ridgley of Columbus, Georgia; and B. Jackson of El Cajon, California.

## A-MAZED by Kay Ellis

Lieutenant Norris phoned headquarters, where his captain waited anxiously.

"What happened?"

"A novice was killed while walking the maze. Supposed to be a peaceful retreat; not so peaceful for her, apparently."

"Any witnesses?"

"Yeah. Nuns saw it. They're in the maze now."

"Huh? Who's in the maze now?"

"Sisters of the Bleeding Heart. They're not exactly sure which path leads to the body, so different groups are trying parallel paths at once, to save time."

"Did you say there were witnesses?"

"That's right. Nuns saw the killing."

"Well, if none saw the killing, how come you're telling me you got witnesses?"

"Because nuns saw it! What is wrong with you today?"

"Me! What about you? If none saw the killing, then you can't go in to court and say there were witnesses! They'll throw the case out!"

"Why? They make perfectly good witnesses!"

"Who?"

"Sisters of the Bleeding Heart!"

"Look. You don't know who did it because none saw it happen, right?"

"No. We *do* know who did it because nuns saw it happen. They recognized a crack dealer from Mass."

"But that's just conjecture without witnesses to the actual murder!"

"We *have* witnesses to the murder! Nuns saw it happen!"

"If none saw it happen, how come you keep saying you have witnesses to the murder?"

"Nuns . . . Oh, wait . . . Not none, nun! Never mind; I'm coming in. I'll explain it to you when I get there."

*continued from page 140*

Sam's art school buddies recruits her to design huge sculptures for the set of an avant-garde production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Great idea until someone begins playing some very dirty and ultimately dangerous backstage tricks. Sam isn't a heroine for the prudish, but if you're looking for a fresh face, here's a good place to start.

Iris Johansen's heroine, Sarah Patrick, works in tandem with her golden retriever Monty as part of a K-9 search and rescue team, and together they have an uncanny knack for success. In this adventure, aptly titled **The Search** (Bantam, \$24.95), Sarah and Monty are hired by John Logan, an enormously wealthy and attractive industrialist, to rescue company workers caught in the crossfire of a Latin American coup. Soon, however, both woman and dog find themselves embroiled with Logan and a cunning, deadly killer with a mind for vengeance. As always, Johansen serves up romantic suspense spiced with action—and characters drawn with a contemporary edginess. It's a winning combo.

Steve Samuel's **Rock, Paper, Scissors** (Simon & Schuster, \$25) is a political thriller that pulls CIA agent Sarah Peterson into a kidnapping scheme plotted at the highest levels of power, a heartless intrigue designed to force the victim's billionaire father to agree to a secret plan for the Middle East. Before it's over, Sarah not only has to elude an assassin, she also finds herself allied with several civilians in a bold rescue plan against two special forces soldiers. Ignore the improbability of the scenario; instead, relish Samuel's detailed research into the latest spy techniques and technology.

Edgar award-winner Harlan Coben is back with another Myron Bolitar mystery, and it's a doozy. The engaging sports agent Myron hears from an ex-girlfriend, and the news he gets inspires the **Darkest Fear** (Delacorte, \$23.95) of the title: her thirteen-year-old son will die without a bone marrow transplant, and the only donor who has come up on the national registry has disappeared. Even more heartbreaking is her second bit of news: Myron is the boy's father. Coben has lifted the novel's premise from the news (and probably made-for-TV movies), but he unfolds the story with a master's hand, showing us another side of his enduring protagonist, then twisting the tale with several kinks in the plot.

Judy Mercer's *Fast Forward* remains one of the genre's freshest and funniest first-person tales to come around in ages. Now her amnesiac heroine, Ariel Gold, is back in her fourth outing in **Blind Spot** (Pocket, \$23.95). Although Ariel's in top form in her career as an on-camera TV journalist, she is still plagued by her memory loss. On this occasion she has received a plea for help from someone who signs her letter merely "Dorothy." By the time Ariel tracks Dorothy down, the old woman has died, apparently of natural causes. But this snoop isn't about to take that for an answer without her own investigation.

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